



Written by **John F. McManus**

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The Phantom Tonkin Attack

By the time U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam had ended in 1973, over 50,000 Americans had been killed and over 300,000 had been wounded. The United States had lost the war that our own military commanders repeatedly insisted could have been won but for political interference from Washington. The ramifications of that defeat — to our nation and the world, and to all who fought, bled, and died — continue to be felt.

Tonkin Gulf Resolution

Our enormous buildup of men and material in Vietnam began immediately after Congress was stampeded into passing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution on August 7, 1964. That resolution — a virtual declaration of war on North Vietnam that supplied the justification for the mismanaged conflict that followed for an entire decade — resulted from a widely publicized North Vietnamese PT boat attack on U.S. destroyers *that never actually took place*.

In August 1964, Commander Jim Stockdale was a Navy pilot flying carrier-based Crusader jet fighters in the Gulf of Tonkin, east of North Vietnam. On August 2nd, he had a hand in successful retaliatory action against three North Vietnamese PT boats that had menaced the destroyer *USS Maddox*. This incident served to put all U.S. naval ships in the area on alert, but it produced neither exciting headlines nor congressional action.

Then, on the night of August 4th, the *Maddox* and another destroyer, the *USS Turner Joy*, radioed that they were under PT boat attack once again. Stockdale arrived on the scene in a Crusader jet, and listened on his radio while the *Maddox* air controller frantically reported: “under attack by three PT boats ... torpedoes in the water ... engaging the enemy with my main battery.”

In his 1984 book (*In Love and War*, co-authored with his wife Sybil), Stockdale tells of searching in vain for the enemy PT boats and of firing his own rockets and machine guns at whatever the destroyers were shooting at. Upon returning to his carrier, he expressed doubt that there had actually been any enemy vessels in the area. He then learned that the senior officer aboard the *Maddox* shared his doubt. But Congress was immediately informed by the McNamara Defense Department of a “sea battle that raged,” with “burning ships and gunfire” and “all the rest.”

A few weeks ago, in a follow-up article he sent to the *Houston Chronicle*, Stockdale wrote: “But not one American out there ever saw a PT boat. There was absolutely no gunfire except our own, no PT boat wakes, not a candle light, let alone a burning ship. None could have been there and not have been seen on such a black night.”

In his book, Stockdale showed how the media had characterized the incident as “a great sea battle.” *Time*, August 14, 1964: “There were at least six of them, Russian-designed *Swatow* gunboats” *Life*, August 14, 1964: “By 10:15 PM, the *Maddox* had avoided



several torpedoes and had sunk one of the attacking craft." **Newsweek**, August 17, 1964: "Torpedoes whipped by, some only 100 feet from the destroyers' beams. A PT boat burst into flames and sank."

Then, four days after Congress had overwhelmingly passed its sweeping resolution, two Defense Department officials flew to the carrier and were told by Stockdale and others of their doubts that any North Vietnamese vessels were in the area of the American destroyers on the night of August 4th.

The Defense Department's history of the early years of the Vietnam War, called "The Pentagon Papers," reveals that Johnson Administration officials had been planning for six months to push a previously prepared resolution through Congress to widen the war. The phantom PT boat attack of August 4th gave them the incident they needed. And Jim Stockdale was later shot down over North Vietnam where he spent eight long years as a prisoner of war.