

The View From the Boat

By JUDITH DROZ KEYES

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On Feb. 28, 1969, my husband was the commander of one of three Swift boats traveling the Dong Cung in Vietnam to carry troops and supplies upriver. The events of that day, and what happened almost two weeks later on another Swift boat patrol, have become a source of controversy in the presidential campaign, with a group of veterans saying that John Kerry did not deserve the medals he won for what he did then. I know my husband thought otherwise.

The other two commanders -- John Kerry and William Rood, an editor at The Chicago Tribune -- have written of the courage they witnessed on Feb. 28. My husband, Lt. j.g. Donald Droz, who grew up in a small Missouri town and was a 1966 graduate of the United States Naval Academy, wrote to me about it in a letter dated March 6, 1969:

"I had quite a morning ... Admiral [Elmo] Zumwalt, Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, flew to An Thoi from Saigon ... for a special awards presentation. To make a somewhat long story short, PCF's 23, 94 and 43 conducted an operation February 28th which we pulled off rather spectacularly. Anyway, for my part, I was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Combat 'V.' I don't mean to blow my own horn, but I really am pleased with the award, and it is a rather significant medal. I'll bring the citation with me to Hawaii."

Don did bring the citation to Hawaii a few weeks later, and I traveled from our home in Pennsylvania with our infant daughter, Tracy, to meet him for his R&R. But before that meeting, Don and John Kerry and others were involved in another battle, on March 13. Don did not write to me about that battle. But he did tell me about it during our five days together in Hawaii -- when he met our daughter for the first time, and held her for what turned out to be the last time.

In Hawaii, Don mostly talked about the future: how he wanted to come home, go to graduate school and then become involved in public service. But he also talked about Vietnam: about how much respect all the "Swifties" had for one another. I remember him saying that John Kerry was heading home, deservedly so, and that he admired his bravery and planned to see him that summer.

Don also talked about how hard it was to be in a situation where no one knew what was around the next bend or what the "rules" were or who was friend and who was foe. He told me he was convinced that what the United States was doing in Vietnam was pointless or worse and that, when he got home, he intended to speak out against it. But he was clear -- and I have always understood -- that he was criticizing the war itself and those who were deciding how to wage it, not those who were putting their lives on the line to do their duty honestly and bravely.

Those who had the courage to fight in Vietnam and, when they returned home, to tell of the reality of what they saw deserve our admiration. I am certain my husband would have been as appalled as I am at the spectacle of some veterans questioning others' service.

Don died on April 12, 1969, just two weeks after we said goodbye in Hawaii and two months before he would have come home. Ever since, I have felt a special obligation to speak the truth as I know he would have done.