

Eyewitness to Kerry in Vietnam: Senator 'aggressive, decisive, effective'

By CHARLES R. GIBSON
Springfield Republican, September 5, 2004

In spite of a strong desire to maintain a low profile, I decided last Sunday that I would write about my experience aboard John Kerry's PCF-94 in late February 1969.

Following the completion of Swift boat training in Coronado, California, my crew and I flew to Vietnam arriving at Cam Ranh Bay on February 15, 1969. We were subsequently assigned to COSDIV 11 at An Thoi and flew into that base on February 19. Following processing and some introductory coastal patrol work, we were ordered to riverine indoctrination in the Ca Mau Peninsula. Our crew was split up among three Swift boats that would be operating together conducting operation Sea Lords incursions from a Coast Guard cutter anchored off the southern tip of the country.

As a Lt.(jg), I was assigned as the Assistant Officer in Charge of Lt. (jg) John Kerry's PCF-94 and my Gunners Mate would be manning the twin 50-caliber machine guns above the pilot house of the same boat. Our other crewmates were assigned to Lt.(jg) Bill Rood's PCF-23 and PCF-43 skippered by Lt.(jg) Don Droz. We operated in these posts from our transit to the Coast Guard cutter on February 24 to our return to An Thoi on March 2. The three boats conducted six river operations on and around the Cua Lon and the Bay Hap Rivers, with Lt.(jg) Kerry serving as Officer in Tactical Command. He had operational responsibility for the three Swifts, any troops that might be aboard, and for the helicopter gunships that may be covering us from above. We engaged in 10 firefights of varying intensity and duration during the six days of operations.

The most significant operation took place on February 28 and has become the object of controversy because John Kerry was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry as a result of that action. I will attempt to describe the action as I saw it from John Kerry's boat that day.

The three boats, with men from UDT-13 aboard, left the Coast Guard cutter in the morning and transited the Bay Hap River to the village of Cai Nuoc. At the village we boarded local Regional Force/Popular Force troops and their American advisors and headed back down the river. After a short distance, we entered a smaller stream traveling in a westerly direction. As was customary, the boats traveled in a column, and after moving some distance into the stream, we began to receive small arms and automatic weapons fire from the north bank. The boats opened fire on the ambush site and Kerry ordered them to beach and put the troops ashore. As the boat turned toward the shore, I saw eight to 10 VC scrambling to get away. The troops were disembarked and PCF-43 remained at the site to provide fire support.

As the 94 and 23 boats moved further downstream a short distance, a B-40 rocket-propelled grenade exploded in the water, close aboard the

starboard rear quarter of PCF-94. Lt.(jg) Kerry ordered the boat to turn around and beach at the second ambush site. As the nose of the boat eased up on the river bank, I saw Kerry move from his position at the pilot house door to the bow of the boat and jump ashore. At that point, I was distracted by what seemed to be small arms fire coming from just to the right of our position and returned it with a few bursts from an M-16.

I saw John Kerry return to the bow area of the boat and, while still ashore, he told me to stay aboard and provide gunfire and mortar support if needed. PCF-43 had rejoined us and a landing party of Swift personnel proceeded to conduct a sweep of the area around the second ambush site. As the ground operation wound down, I went ashore and saw the body of the man who had fired the B-40 RPG and had reloaded the tube with the obvious intent of firing another round. This was the man that Lt.(jg) Kerry had shot and it was the first combat fatality that I had seen.

The vision was indelible and I have not forgotten it to this day. Contrary to some accounts, this was not a child. He appeared to be 18 to 20 years of age, a contemporary of our younger crew members. He had not been shot in the back as some have stated. Rather, he had an entry wound at the side of his chest and exit wound at the opposite side of the chest cavity, a wound that was consistent with reports of the man turning to fire a second B-40 rocket. I did not see any obvious evidence of a leg wound, but was not really looking closely for one.

As we boarded the boats and were backing away from the shore, we began to receive small arms and automatic weapons fire from the other side of the river, toward the southwest. The boats suppressed the fire and transited back to Cai Nuoc. We remained at the village until darkness fell, at which time the three PCFs headed down the Bay Hap to return to the Coast Guard cutter for the night. Prior to reaching the mouth of the river, we were ambushed for a third time, this time from the eastern shore. It was the most spectacular firefight that I would ever see, with our 50s spewing red tracers and point-detonating rounds that would flash brightly in the trees, and their automatic weapons firing green tracer rounds. The boats suppressed the enemy fire and safely exited the river. The operation was very successful in that an enemy resupply complex had been destroyed, 10 VC were killed, and we suffered no friendly casualties.

Another notable operation conducted during the period took place on the night of February 26, when the three boats were navigating their way toward the entrance to the Cua Lon River. While transiting what we called Square Bay and just before the mouth of the river, we came upon two empty sampans with motors still running. After searching for about 10 minutes, one of the boats discovered two men in the water and brought them aboard without incident. At the edge of a small, marshy island, three more men were discovered in the water. One had suffered a long, deep cut on his leg, apparently as a result of being hit by the screws of one of the boats. The other two resisted and then played dead. Lt.(jg) Kerry and a few of the crew members jumped into the water and knee-deep muck, pulled the men out of the water, and brought them aboard. As we started to get

the boat underway, an explosion occurred between the 23 and the 43 boats and they sprayed the small island with machine-gun fire. We took the five men to the Coast Guard cutter where the wounded man received medical attention and the other four were wrapped in blankets and fed. The wounded man was taken ashore the next day and medevaced to a medical facility.

I was impressed at how well Lt.(jg)'s Kerry, Rood, and Droz worked together during that one-week period, which has since been dubbed "hell week." My personal opinion of John Kerry, acting in his role as Officer in Tactical Command during that one-week period that I was temporarily assigned to his boat, is that he was aggressive, decisive, and effective in carrying out his responsibilities, and showed strong leadership and courage in the process. He did not receive the Silver Star for chasing down a kid and shooting him in the back. He received it for directing a highly successful operation in the face of enemy fire and taking out a combatant who was capable of firing a second B-40 RPG.

Upon returning to An Thoi on March 2, my crew and I took over PCF-66 and operated it until late April, at which time we were assigned PCF-72. We patrolled the rivers until the month of July, when I was named division maintenance officer. Shortly afterwards, my veteran crew was transferred to Cam Ranh Bay to train South Vietnamese Navy Swift boat crews.

The pleasures of seeing the faces and hearing the voices of the men with whom I served 35 years ago is dampened by the deep regret that I am feeling over the fact that those who have been through so much together find themselves so deeply divided. There are men on both sides of the controversy whom I respect and admire, who served honorably, courageously, and with distinction.

It was truly an extraordinary privilege to have served with them -- ALL OF THEM!

[Note: In this transcription, a copy of the original letter was used to restore a few words that were removed from the published version, along with the author's original emphasis on the last three words.]