

John Kerry's War

By STEVE HAYES

Washington Post, April 17, 2004

I knew John Kerry. We served together in late 1968 and early '69 as Navy Swift Boat officers-in-charge in Coastal Division 14 in Cam Ranh Bay and in Coastal Division 11 in An Thoi, Vietnam.

I didn't know him well. I found him a bit aloof and imperious. After a 24-hour patrol, most of us would kick back, get a cold beer, talk or sleep. After a 24-hour patrol, I remember Kerry would usually be in the squadron office writing. I never knew exactly what he was working on. Notes? Letters? His war diary? But always he was writing.

His service along the coast and in the rivers was commendable. But there was always something a bit odd about his time with us.

Kerry served approximately 4 1/2 months "in country" -- a little more than one-third the normal 12-month tour. Within a 90-day period, he received three injuries that resulted in Purple Heart awards. All three wounds were minor. Tedd Peck, one of our Coastal Division 14 fellow officers, says that Kerry pressured our squadron executive officer to "put him in" for his first Purple Heart after the squadron commander indicated he thought the injury was so minor it didn't rise to the level of an award.

Finally, Lt. j.g. Kerry could have remained in Vietnam with the rest of us, but he made a formal request to be reassigned to the States, as three Purple Hearts entitled him to do. I remember colleagues leaving Vietnam early ... in body bags. I remember some being medevaced back home because of serious wounds. I recall no one, except Kerry, asking that his tour be cut short and that he be sent home.

All this has always seemed just a little strange to me. But no more strange than the son of a Texas congressman jumping over several hundred other folks to gain admission to the Texas National Guard, then not showing up -- or at least not having any record of attendance -- at many of the mandatory drills. But then the late '60s and early '70s were strange times.

Most Vietnam veterans I know who oppose Kerry are not irate over what he did or did not do in Vietnam but over what he did after returning. His mistake was in blurring the line between protesting the war and our foreign policy on the one hand and, on the other hand, tarnishing the reputations of good men who did what their country asked them to do.