

The Kerry Connection

In the 2004 presidential campaign, Jerry Leeds spoke out--quietly.

By KATHERINE HOUSE

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Jerry Leeds still wears a coat and tie when he visits distributors. He always turns his cell phone off for customer meetings, and he decided long ago that he wouldn't talk about religion and politics with customers. In fact, Leeds, of Girard, Kan., prefers to keep politics out of conversations with most friends. Which makes the story of how he became a player in one of the most charged debates of this year's presidential election all the more interesting.

Many long-time forms pros know Leeds as a fun-loving industry veteran who headed manufacturer APICO when it was sold to Mail-Well in 1998. They may not know, however, that Leeds is a Navy veteran who, like John Kerry, served on a swift boat during the Vietnam War. Earlier this year, Leeds gained some measure of fame because he has knowledge about Kerry's service that few others possess: On Feb. 28, 1969, Leeds served on the same mission as Kerry, a mission for which Kerry was awarded a Silver Star. Leeds received a Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V" for his efforts that day.

In their book, *Unfit for Command*, authors John E. O'Neill and Jerome R. Corsi dispute the details of that mission and question, among other things, whether Kerry deserved his war medals. A Houston attorney, O'Neill helped to organize Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a group that aired anti-Kerry television ads during the campaign. O'Neill, a former swift boat commander, took over Kerry's boat after Kerry left Vietnam. In 1971, O'Neill and Kerry, who had differing opinions about the war, aired their views during a debate on "The Dick Cavett Show."

15 Minutes of (Unwanted) Fame

The publicity surrounding O'Neill's book, in part, prompted the Chicago Tribune to publish a first-person account last Aug. 22 of the Feb. 28, 1969, mission. The article's author was William Rood, a Tribune editor and commander of the boat Leeds served on that day. In writing his version of the events, Rood said he broke his longtime silence because "...I know that what some people are saying now is wrong. While they mean to hurt Kerry, what they're saying impugns others who are not in the public eye." Newspapers nationwide reprinted the article, which was read by millions of Americans.

In the article, Rood said he checked his "recollection of all these events" with Leeds, his boat's leading petty officer. Leeds says he went through the article sentence by sentence with Rood over the phone prior to publication. If the two men didn't agree on something, that detail was taken out in an effort to make the article as accurate as possible. Toward the end of the article, Rood wrote that Leeds "lives in a tiny Kansas town where he built and sold a successful printing business. He owns a beautiful home with a lawn that sweeps to the edge of a small lake, which he also owns."

Leeds says he decided to help Rood after being upset with what O'Neill had said on MSNBC's "Scarborough Country" in August about that February day. He was so angry about O'Neill's allegations that Leeds called O'Neill and discussed what happened on the mission. Rood, too, had been unhappy with O'Neill's interview and wanted to set the record straight.

By helping Rood, Leeds was immediately unpopular with Republicans and anti-Kerry veterans. He also was highly sought after by the news media. Leeds declined to talk to MSNBC, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and others, in part because he felt that Rood's article told his version of the events, too. Even when Kerry phoned Leeds and asked him to tell reporters what he remembered, Leeds politely declined. He says he told the presidential candidate, "Half the people I know love you and the other half hate you. I love you guys [fellow veterans] dearly, but you're not worth losing friends or business over."

Leeds agreed to talk to Print Solutions because he knew this article would reach readers after Election Day. He sincerely hopes that others understand that loyalty to his fellow soldiers--not politics--was his only motivation for speaking out. Leeds says he could not sit back and see people "sliming my crew" and deceased veterans who no longer can defend themselves. (For the record, at press time Leeds was a registered Republican who counted himself among the country's many undecided voters. He says he votes for the person, not the party, and has cast ballots for Republican and Democratic candidates in the past.) He stresses that he cannot speak about whether John Kerry deserved all of his war medals. But he says he knows what happened the day Kerry's actions won him the Silver Star.

Leeds vividly remembers the hot, humid day of Feb. 28, 1969. Only three boats were on patrol together along the Dong Cung canal, he recalls. (Sometimes there were as many as 30, although 10 to 15 was more typical, he says.) Kerry, the Officer of Tactical Command that day, was commander of PCF-94; Don Droz, who was killed in action less than two months later, commanded a second boat, PCF-43; and Rood was in command of PCF-23. Each boat had five enlisted men and one officer aboard. The boats also had picked up members of special forces that morning since they had intelligence indicating the Viet Cong had a well-fortified position nearby, recalls Leeds.

When the swift boats came under fire, they charged the enemy position instead of roaring past it, Leeds says. According to the Tribune article, it was customary for the boats to motor past an ambush, fire at the enemy and land troops upstream. By the time the troops reached the enemy's position, the enemy typically had fled. "No one had ever used the tactic of turning into an ambush," Leeds says.

As the Officer of Tactical Command that day, Kerry was the one to give the "turn 90" order. Although the maneuver surprised the enemy, it didn't surprise Kerry's fellow troops. Droz, Kerry and Rood had developed the plan in advance, says Leeds, partly to surprise the enemy and partly out of necessity. The 50-foot-long swift boats had limited maneuverability in the narrow waterway, which Leeds estimates was only about 80 feet wide.

The daring mission was successful. Leeds' citation, which is signed by Vice Admiral E.R. Zumwalt Jr., notes that 10 Viet Cong were killed with one wounded and no "friendly casualties." The original radio message from task force commander Captain Roy Hoffmann to the three boats praises the "superb coordination and aggressive tactics" that day as "a shining example of completely overwhelming the enemy." Hoffmann went on to become a rear admiral and helped organize Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

Leeds supplied a copy of the radio message to the Chicago Tribune and Print Solutions. The message goes on to say, "It is gratifying to note the critical supplies and weaponry" that were destroyed and captured. According to the message, the Americans destroyed 30 sampans, 15 structures, seven bunkers and 12 tons of rice. Among the items captured were a B-40 rocket launcher and a still with 50 gallons of alcohol. Leeds chuckles when recalling how the soldiers emptied orange juice containers and anything they could find on their boats so they could refill them with the enemy's alcohol.

From Vietnam to Vertical Spacing

Like many others who became forms pros decades ago, Leeds fell into his first industry job. After he got out of the Navy, he ran an appliance store in Girard. When the store closed, Jerry Mitchell asked Leeds to talk to him and Leon Bogner about a job at Ace Forms. (As Girard residents, Leeds and Mitchell knew each other socially.) When he arrived at the meeting, Leeds was confused about the discussion of business forms. He had assumed Mitchell was talking about concrete forms used for pouring building foundations.

Leeds took the job in March 1977 and worked alongside C.W. Betz and Bob Pyle. The offer was for "\$150 a week and all the quotes you could do," he says. After Ace was bought by Sturgis Newport, Leeds left and started APICO in December 1987 in the former Ben Franklin store with partners John Fogg, Jim Powell, and Robert Gladson.

Through the years, Leeds never forgot about his fellow veterans. In 1972, when Kerry gave an anti-war lecture at southeast Kansas' Pittsburg State University, Leeds refused to go. He called Kerry and said, "I'm not coming to the lecture because I don't agree with it." Instead, Leeds, his wife and Kerry met for drinks afterward, and the two men reminisced about the war. Leeds took an active role in the Swift Boat Sailors Association, a group of former swift boat sailors, by sending out membership cards and helping to organize reunions.

At the group's first reunion in Washington, D.C., in 1995, Leeds saw Kerry for the first time since they had met in Kansas in 1972. (They had communicated a few times by phone and fax about swift boat memorabilia, Leeds says.) Kerry and his recent bride Teresa held a cocktail party at their home for former swift boat officers and others who had served with the senator in Vietnam, which Leeds attended. The "swifties," including Kerry and Leeds, whizzed along the Potomac River at high speed on a refurbished swift boat they were dedicating to a naval museum. Kerry invited Leeds and his crew to visit his Senate office. Before accepting the offer, the men took a vote since some of them were still angry with Kerry

for his criticism of the war after he returned from Vietnam. Leeds said the group decided, "Let's let bygones be bygones." They enjoyed a tour of Kerry's office and ate lunch in the Senate dining room.

Today, Leeds rents office space at Kansas Business Forms in Girard and stays in contact with industry friends. When his thoughts return to the swifties, he muses about what will happen at next year's Swift Boat Sailors Association reunion in St. Louis. Will Kerry, Hoffmann or O'Neill attend? Who will be speaking to whom? And, finally, will the political election that split a nation continue to divide this group of men who once relied on each other in life-and-death situations?

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