

Shame on the Swift Boat Veterans for Bush
John Kerry saved my life. Now his heroism is being questioned.

By JIM RASSMANN
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I came to know Lt. John Kerry during the spring of 1969. He and his swift boat crew assisted in inserting our Special Forces team and our Chinese Nung soldiers into operational sites in the Cau Mau Peninsula of South Vietnam. I worked with him on many operations and saw firsthand his leadership, courage and decision-making ability under fire.

On March 13, 1969, John Kerry's courage and leadership saved my life.

While returning from a SEA LORDS operation along the Bay Hap River, a mine detonated under another swift boat. Machine-gun fire erupted from both banks of the river, and a second explosion followed moments later. The second blast blew me off John's swift boat, PCF-94, throwing me into the river. Fearing that the other boats would run me over, I swam to the bottom of the river and stayed there as long as I could hold my breath.

When I surfaced, all the swift boats had left, and I was alone taking fire from both banks. To avoid the incoming fire, I repeatedly swam under water as long as I could hold my breath, attempting to make it to the north bank of the river. I thought I would die right there. The odds were against me avoiding the incoming fire and, even if I made it out of the river, I thought I'd be captured and executed. Kerry must have seen me in the water and directed his driver, Del Sandusky, to turn the boat around. Kerry's boat ran up to me in the water, bow on, and I was able to climb up a cargo net to the lip of the deck. But, because I was nearly upside down, I couldn't make it over the edge of the deck. This left me hanging out in the open, a perfect target. John, already wounded by the explosion that threw me off his boat, came out onto the bow, exposing himself to the fire directed at us from the jungle, and pulled me aboard.

For his actions that day, I recommended John for the Silver Star, our country's third highest award for bravery under fire. I learned only this past January that the Navy awarded John the Bronze Star with Combat V for his valor. The citation for this award, signed by the Commander of U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, Vice Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, read, "Lieutenant (junior grade) Kerry's calmness, professionalism and great personal courage under fire were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service." To this day I am grateful to John Kerry for saving my life. And to this day I still believe that he deserved the Silver Star for his courage.

It has been many years since I served in Vietnam. I returned home, got married, and spent many years as a deputy sheriff for Los Angeles County. I retired in 1989 as a lieutenant. It has been a long time since I left Vietnam, but I think often of the men who did not come home with us.

I am neither a politician nor an organizer. I am a retired police officer with a passion for orchids. Until January of this year, the only public presentations I made were about my orchid hobby. But in this presidential election, I had to speak out; I had to tell the American people about John

Kerry, about his wisdom and courage, about his vision and leadership. I would trust John Kerry with my life, and I would entrust John Kerry with the well-being of our country.

Nobody asked me to join John's campaign. Why would they? I am a Republican, and for more than 30 years I have largely voted for Republicans. I volunteered for his campaign because I have seen John Kerry in the worst of conditions. I know his character. I've witnessed his bravery and leadership under fire. And I truly know he will be a great commander in chief.

Now, 35 years after the fact, some Republican-financed Swift Boat Veterans for Bush are suddenly lying about John Kerry's service in Vietnam; they are calling him a traitor because he spoke out against the Nixon administration's failed policies in Vietnam. Some of these Republican-sponsored veterans are the same ones who spoke out against John at the behest of the Nixon administration in 1971. But this time their attacks are more vicious, their lies cut deep and are directed not just at John Kerry, but at me and each of his crewmates as well. This hate-filled ad asserts that I was not under fire; it questions my words and Navy records. This smear campaign has been launched by people without decency, people who don't understand the bond of those who serve in combat.

As John McCain noted, the television ad aired by these veterans is "dishonest and dishonorable." Sen. McCain called on President Bush to condemn the Swift Boat Veterans for Bush ad. Regrettably, the president has ignored Sen. McCain's advice.

Does this strategy of attacking combat Vietnam veterans sound familiar? In 2000, a similar Republican smear campaign was launched against Sen. McCain. In fact, the very same communications group, Spaeth Communications, that placed ads against John McCain in 2000 is involved in these vicious attacks against John Kerry. Texas Republican donors with close ties to George W. Bush and Karl Rove crafted this "dishonest and dishonorable" ad. Their new charges are false; their stories are fabricated, made up by people who did not serve with Kerry in Vietnam. They insult and defame all of us who served in Vietnam.

But when the noise and fog of their distortions and lies have cleared, a man who volunteered to serve his country, a man who showed up for duty when his country called, a man to whom the United States Navy awarded a Silver Star, a Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts, will stand tall and proud. Ultimately, the American people will judge these Swift Boat Veterans for Bush and their accusations. Americans are tired of smear campaigns against those who volunteered to wear the uniform. Swift Boat Veterans for Bush should hang their heads in shame.