

## Kerry's Leadership is Battle-Tested

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I was a naval officer who served with John Kerry, the Massachusetts senator who is soon to become the official Democratic presidential nominee. I came to know him under the extraordinary circumstances of combat.

In early 1969, I was in charge of a small unit of Navy Special Warfare men assigned to riverine duty in the southernmost part of Vietnam, south of the Mekong Delta. We were often assigned to run Agent Orange-infested rivers aboard small watercraft known as swiftboats. Kerry was an officer in charge of one of these boats. They were indeed fast and maneuverable, but no match for AK-47s or rockets or grenade rounds. They were, in fact, floating targets, always in danger of ambush. It was only a matter of time before a boat would take incoming fire, causing injury or death.

My men and I were often with Kerry. We were on Kerry's PCF-94 boat on Feb. 28, 1969, when I felt the impact from a watery explosion. The crew reacted with small-arms fire and machine-gun and grenade fire. The boat then veered hard left, toward the gunfire, and beached on the riverbank. All aboard disembarked and spread out. I didn't see what happened next, but reports are that Kerry killed a Viet Cong who was holding a rocket launcher.

Adrenaline was always at a high level on one of these operations. Reactions were usually instinctive. And so, instinctively, Kerry had given the order to veer, thereby narrowing the boat as a target and reducing the likelihood of us getting hit. In so doing, he saved lives and earned the Silver Star. I then regarded, as I do now, this action as heroic. And having operated with him on numerous other occasions, I regard his entire Vietnam service as in keeping with the highest traditions of naval service. He was an exemplar of the citizen-soldier.

Yet there remain many -- including highly decorated Vietnam veterans -- who do not share my view. Why? It has to do with deep feelings about our country and its involvement in Vietnam. Kerry, I and others went deep into the heart of Vietnam. We felt betrayed because it became impossible to make any sense out of our experience. We protested. We wore peace medallions. We grew our hair well beyond regulation length. We put our men first and would not expose them to kamikaze-type missions that served no purpose other than to increase the enemy body count so that headquarters' statistics looked better.

Following discharge, our anger could not be quieted. The war raged on -- insanely. Kerry became highly visible, giving -- with long hair but still in uniform and wearing his ribbons -- testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that was highly critical of the war effort and the mounting casualties on both sides. Around that time came what many regard as an act of ultimate disrespect to his service and his uniform -- throwing his ribbons over a fence in Washington. Kerry did not hurl his medals over that fence. These he retained as a testament to the part of his service of which he will be forever proud.

I am glad that he kept his medals. (I kept mine, too.) I know with absolute certainty that I can trust him to make the right choice when the time again comes -- as it surely will -- to committing our nation's armed forces into combat. There is no graver decision to be made. The stakes are enormous.

We are fortunate as a nation to have the opportunity to hand the power to make these choices to John Kerry.