

JOHN KERRY'S WAR RECORD

Swift boat skipper: Kerry critics wrong

Tribune editor breaks long silence on Kerry record; fought in disputed battle

By Tim Jones
Tribune national correspondent

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The commander of a Navy swift boat who served alongside Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry during the Vietnam War [stepped forward Saturday](#) to dispute attacks challenging Kerry's integrity and war record.

William Rood, an editor on the Chicago Tribune's metropolitan desk, said he broke 35 years of silence about the Feb. 28, 1969, mission that resulted in Kerry's receiving a Silver Star because recent portrayals of Kerry's actions published in the best-selling book "Unfit for Command" are wrong and smear the reputations of veterans who served with Kerry.

Rood, who commanded one of three swift boats during that 1969 mission, said Kerry came under rocket and automatic weapons fire from Viet Cong forces and that Kerry devised an aggressive attack strategy that was praised by their superiors. He called allegations that Kerry's accomplishments were "overblown" untrue.

"The critics have taken pains to say they're not trying to cast doubts on the merit of what others did, but their version of events has splashed doubt on all of us. It's gotten harder and harder for those of us who were there to listen to accounts we know to be untrue, especially when they come from people who were not there," Rood said in a 1,700-word first-person account published in Sunday's Tribune.

Rood's recollection of what happened on that day at the southern tip of South Vietnam was backed by key military documents, including his citation for a Bronze Star he earned in the battle and a glowing after-action report written by the Navy captain who commanded his and Kerry's task force, who is now a critic of the Democratic candidate.

Rood's previously untold story and the documents shed new light on a key historical event that has taken center stage in an extraordinary political and media firestorm generated by a group calling itself the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

Allegations in the book, co-authored by one of the leaders of the group, accuse Kerry of being a coward who fabricated wartime events and used comrades for his "insatiable appetite for medals." The allegations have fueled a nearly two-week-long TV ad campaign against the Democratic nominee. Talk radio and cable news channels have feasted on the story.

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Animosity from some veterans toward Kerry goes back more than 30 years, when Kerry returned from Vietnam to take a leadership role in the anti-war group Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Anger reached a boiling point with Kerry's presidential nomination and his own highlighting of his service during the war, a centerpiece of his campaign strategy against President Bush, who spent the war stateside in the Air National Guard in Texas and Alabama.

Many know of ads

A poll released Friday by the National Annenberg Election Survey reported that more than half the country has heard about or seen TV ads attacking Kerry's war record, a remarkable impact for ads that have appeared in only a handful of states.

Kerry strongly disputes the allegations. Last week he called on the White House to denounce the TV ads and accused Bush of relying on the Vietnam veterans "to do his dirty work." On Thursday, Kerry challenged Bush to a debate on their respective war records. Democrats point to unresolved questions about whether Bush in fact served all the time he was credited with serving in Alabama.

The Bush campaign has denied any association with the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth but so far has refused to condemn the book and the group's TV ads. A report in Friday's New York Times disclosed connections between the anti-Kerry vets and the Bush family, Bush's chief political aide Karl Rove and several high-ranking Texas Republicans. Some of the recent accounts from veterans critical of Kerry have been contradicted by their own earlier statements, the Times reported.

Rood's account also sharply contradicts the version currently put forth by the anti-Kerry veterans. Rood, 61, wrote that Kerry had personally contacted him and other crew members in recent days asking that they go public with their accounts of what happened on that day.

Rood said that, ever since the war, he had "wanted to put it all behind us—the rivers, the ambushes, the killing. ... I have refused all requests for interviews about Kerry's service—even those from reporters at the Chicago Tribune."

"I can't pretend those calls [from Kerry] had no effect on me, but that is not why I am writing this," Rood said. "What matters most to me is that this is hurting crewmen who are not public figures and who deserved to be honored for what they did. My intent is to tell the story here and to never again talk publicly about it."

Rood declined requests from a Tribune reporter to be interviewed for this article. Rood wrote that he could testify only to the February 1969 mission and not to any of the other battlefield decorations challenged by Kerry's critics—a Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts—because Rood was not an eyewitness to those engagements.

Ambush scenario

In February 1969, Rood was a lieutenant junior grade commanding PCF-23, one of the three 50-foot aluminum swift boats that carried troops up the Dong Cung, a tributary of the Bay Hap River. Kerry commanded another boat, PCF-94 and Lt. j.g. Donald Droz, who was killed in action six weeks later, commanded PCF-43. Ambushes from Viet Cong fighters were common because the noise from boats, powered by twin diesel engines, practically invited gunfire. Ambushes, Rood said, "were a virtual certainty."

Before this day's mission, though, Kerry, the tactical commander of the mission, discussed with Rood and Droz a change in response to the anticipated ambushes: If possible, turn into the fire once it is identified and attack the ambushers, Rood recalled Kerry saying. The boats followed that new tactic with great success, Rood said, and the mission was highly praised.

In the book "Unfit for Command," Kerry's critics maintained otherwise. The book's authors, John O'Neill and Jerome Corsi, wrote that Kerry's attack on the Viet Cong ambush displayed "stupidity, not courage." The book was published by Regnery, a conservative publisher that has brought into print many books critical of Democratic politicians and policies.

"The only explanation for what Kerry did is the same justification that characterizes his entire short Vietnam adventure: the pursuit of medals and ribbons," wrote Corsi and O'Neill. Later in the war, O'Neill commanded the same Swift boat Kerry had led. O'Neill is now a leader of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

In the book, O'Neill and Corsi said Kerry chased down a "young Viet Cong in a loincloth ... clutching a grenade launcher which may or may not have been loaded."

Rood recalled the fleeing Viet Cong was "a grown man, dressed in the kind of garb the VC usually wore." There were other attackers as well, he said, and his boat and Kerry's boat took significant fire.

After the attack, the task force commanding officer, then-Capt. Roy Hoffmann, sent a message of congratulations to the three swift boats, saying their charge of the ambushers was a "shining example of completely overwhelming the enemy" and that it "may be the most efficacious [method] of dealing with small numbers of ambushers," Rood said.

In the official after-action message, obtained by the Tribune, Hoffmann wrote that the tactics developed and executed by Kerry, Rood and Droz were "immensely effective [sic]" and that "this operation did unreparable [sic] damage to the enemy in this area."

"Well done," Hoffmann concluded in his message.

Change of story

But more than three decades later, Hoffmann, now a retired rear admiral, has changed his story. Today he is one of Kerry's most vocal critics, saying the attacks against the ambushers 35 years ago call into question Kerry's judgment and show his tendency to be impulsive.

Rood challenges that criticism, recalling that the direction for the actions they took on the river that day came from the highest ranks of the Navy command in Vietnam.

"What we did on Feb. 28, 1969, was well in line with the tone set by our top commanders," Rood said.

Asked for his response to Rood's account, O'Neill argued that the former swift boat skipper's version of events is not substantially different from what appeared in his book. The account of the Feb. 28 attack draws heavily on reporting from The Boston Globe, O'Neill said.

He said the congratulatory note from Hoffmann was based on the belief that Kerry was under heavy fire from the Viet Cong. But O'Neill claimed that "didn't happen." Had Hoffmann known the true circumstances of events that day, O'Neill said, he would not have issued the congratulatory note. Attempts to reach Hoffmann for comment were unsuccessful.

In his eyewitness account, Rood describes coming under rocket and automatic weapons fire from Viet Cong on the riverbank during two separate ambushes of his boat and Kerry's boat.

Praise for the mission led by Kerry came from Navy commanders who far outranked Hoffmann. Rood won a Bronze Star for his actions on that day. The Bronze Star citation from the late Adm. Elmo Zumwalt, then commander of U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, singled out the tactic used by the boats and said the Viet Cong were "caught completely off guard."

Longtime debate

The war about the war between O'Neill and Kerry has raged for more than three decades. O'Neill, who became a lawyer in Houston after returning from Vietnam, was recruited by the Nixon administration in 1971 to serve as a political counterweight to Kerry, who by then had left the military and was a vocal critic of the war.

The two debated the war on the Dick Cavett television show in 1971, with O'Neill accusing Kerry of the "attempted murder of the reputations of 2½ million" Vietnam veterans.

Rood acknowledged in his first-person account that there could always be errors in recollection, especially with the passage of more than three decades. His Bronze Star citation, he said, misidentifies the river where the main action occurred.

That mistake, he said, is a "cautionary note for those trying to piece it all together. There's no final authority on something that happened so long ago—not the documents and not even the strained recollections of those of us who were there.

"But I know that what some people are saying now is wrong," Rood wrote. "While they mean to hurt Kerry, what they're saying impugns others who are not in the public eye."

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Feb. 28, 1969: ON THE DONG CUNG RIVER

Anti-Kerry vets not there that day

By William B. Rood
Chicago Tribune

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There were three swift boats on the river that day in Vietnam more than 35 years ago—three officers and 15 crew members. Only two of those officers remain to talk about what happened on February 28, 1969.

One is John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate who won a Silver Star for what happened on that date. I am the other.

For years, no one asked about those events. But now they are the focus of skirmishing in a presidential election with a group of swift boat veterans and others contending that Kerry didn't deserve the Silver Star for what he did on that day, or the Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts he was awarded for other actions.

Many of us wanted to put it all behind us—the rivers, the ambushes, the killing. Ever since that time, I have refused all requests for interviews about Kerry's service—even those from reporters at the Chicago Tribune, where I work.

But Kerry's critics, armed with stories I know to be untrue, have charged that the accounts of what happened were overblown. The critics have taken pains to say they're not trying to cast doubts on the merit of what others did, but their version of events has splashed doubt on all of us. It's gotten harder and harder for those of us who were there to listen to accounts we know to be untrue, especially when they come from people who were not there.

Even though Kerry's own crew members have backed him, the attacks have continued, and in recent days Kerry has called me and others who were with him in those days, asking that we go public with our accounts.

I can't pretend those calls had no effect on me, but that is not why I am writing this. What matters most to me is that this is hurting crewmen who are not public figures and who deserved to be honored for what they did. My intent is to tell the story here and to never again talk publicly about it.

I was part of the operation that led to Kerry's Silver Star. I have no firsthand knowledge of the events that resulted in his winning the Purple Hearts or the Bronze Star.

But on Feb. 28, 1969, I was officer in charge of PCF-23, one of three swift boats—including Kerry's PCF-94 and Lt. j.g. Donald Droz's PCF-43—that carried Vietnamese regional and Popular Force troops and a Navy demolition team up the Dong Cung, a narrow tributary of the Bay Hap River, to conduct a sweep in the area.

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The approach of the noisy 50-foot aluminum boats, each driven by two huge 12-cylinder diesels and loaded down with six crew members, troops and gear, was no secret.

Ambushes were a virtual certainty, and that day was no exception.

Instructions from Kerry

The difference was that Kerry, who had tactical command of that particular operation, had talked to Droz and me beforehand about not responding the way the boats usually did to an ambush.

We agreed that if we were not crippled by the initial volley and had a clear fix on the location of the ambush, we would turn directly into it, focusing the boats' twin .50-caliber machine guns on the attackers and beaching the boats. We told our crews about the plan.

The Viet Cong in the area had come to expect that the heavily loaded boats would lumber on past an ambush, firing at the entrenched attackers, beaching upstream and putting troops ashore to sweep back down on the ambush site. Often, they were long gone by the time the troops got there.

The first time we took fire—the usual rockets and automatic weapons—Kerry ordered a "turn 90" and the three boats roared in on the ambush. It worked. We routed the ambush, killing three of the attackers. The troops, led by an Army adviser, jumped off the boats and began a sweep, which killed another half dozen VC, wounded or captured others and found weapons, blast masks and other supplies used to stage ambushes.

Meanwhile, Kerry ordered our boat to head upstream with his, leaving Droz's boat at the first site.

It happened again, another ambush. And again, Kerry ordered the turn maneuver, and again it worked. As we headed for the riverbank, I remember seeing a loaded B-40 launcher pointed at the boats. It wasn't fired as two men jumped up from their spider holes.

We called Droz's boat up to assist us, and Kerry, followed by one member of his crew, jumped ashore and chased a VC behind a hooch—a thatched hut—maybe 15 yards inland from the ambush site. Some who were there that day recall the man being wounded as he ran. Neither I nor Jerry Leeds, our boat's leading petty officer with whom I've checked my recollection of all these events, recalls that, which is no surprise. Recollections of those who go through experiences like that frequently differ.

With our troops involved in the sweep of the first ambush site, Richard Lamberson, a member of my crew, and I also went ashore to search the area. I was checking out the inside of the hooch when I heard gunfire nearby.

Not long after that, Kerry returned, reporting that he had killed the man he chased behind the hooch. He also had picked up a loaded B-40 rocket launcher, which we took back to our base in An Thoi after the operation.

John O'Neill, author of a highly critical account of Kerry's Vietnam service, describes the man Kerry chased as a "teenager" in a "loincloth." I have no idea how old the gunner Kerry chased that day was, but both Leeds and I recall that he was a grown man, dressed in the kind of garb the VC usually wore.

The man Kerry chased was not the "lone" attacker at that site, as O'Neill suggests. There were others who fled. There was also firing from the tree line well behind the spider holes and at one point, from the

opposite riverbank as well. It was not the work of just one attacker.

Our initial reports of the day's action caused an immediate response from our task force headquarters in Cam Ranh Bay.

Congratulatory message

Known over radio circuits by the call sign "Latch," then-Capt. and now retired Rear Adm. Roy Hoffmann, the task force commander, fired off a message congratulating the three swift boats, saying at one point that the tactic of charging the ambushes was a "shining example of completely overwhelming the enemy" and that it "may be the most efficacious method of dealing with small numbers of ambushers."

Hoffmann has become a leading critic of Kerry's and now says that what the boats did on that day demonstrated Kerry's inclination to be impulsive to a fault.

Our decision to use that tactic under the right circumstances was not impulsive but was the result of discussions well beforehand and a mutual agreement of all three boat officers.

It was also well within the aggressive tradition that was embraced by the late Adm. Elmo Zumwalt, then commander of U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam. Months before that day in February, a fellow boat officer, Michael Bernique, was summoned to Saigon to explain to top Navy commanders why he had made an unauthorized run up the Giang Thanh River, which runs along the Vietnam-Cambodia border. Bernique, who speaks French fluently, had been told by a source in Ha Tien at the mouth of the river that a VC tax collector was operating upstream.

Ignoring the prohibition against it, Bernique and his crew went upstream and routed the VC, pursuing and killing several.

Instead of facing disciplinary action as he had expected, Bernique was given the Silver Star, and Zumwalt ordered other swifts, which had largely patrolled coastal waters, into the rivers.

The decision sent a clear message, underscored repeatedly by Hoffmann's congratulatory messages, that aggressive patrolling was expected and that well-timed, if unconventional, tactics like Bernique's were encouraged.

What we did on Feb. 28, 1969, was well in line with the tone set by our top commanders.

Zumwalt made that clear when he flew down to our base at An Thoi off the southern tip of Vietnam to pin the Silver Star on Kerry and assorted Bronze Stars and commendation medals on the rest of us.

Error in citation

My Bronze Star citation, signed by Zumwalt, praised the charge tactic we used that day, saying the VC were "caught completely off guard."

There's at least one mistake in that citation. It incorrectly identifies the river where the main action occurred, a reminder that such documents were often done in haste and sometimes authored for their signers by staffers. It's a cautionary note for those trying to piece it all together. There's no final authority on something that happened so long ago—not the documents and not even the strained recollections of those of us who were there.

But 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.

Men like Larry Lee, who was on our bow with an M-60 machine gun as we charged the riverbank, Kenneth Martin, who was in the .50-caliber gun tub atop our boat, and Benjamin Cueva, our engineman, who was at our aft gun mount suppressing the fire from the opposite bank.

Wayne Langhoffer and the other crewmen on Droz's boat went through even worse on April 12, 1969, when they saw Droz killed in a brutal ambush that left PCF-43 an abandoned pile of wreckage on the banks of the Duong Keo River. That was just a few months after the birth of his only child, Tracy.

The survivors of all these events are scattered across the country now.

Jerry 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. Every year, flights of purple martins return to the stately birdhouses on the tall poles in his back yard.

Cueva, recently retired, has raised three daughters and is beloved by his neighbors for all the years he spent keeping their cars running. Lee is a senior computer programmer in Kentucky, and Lamberson finished a second military career in the Army.

With the debate over that long-ago day in February, they're all living that war another time.

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