

Records Counter a Critic of Kerry

Fellow Skipper's Citation Refers To Enemy Fire

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, August 19, 2004; Page A01

Newly obtained military records of one of Sen. John F. Kerry's most vocal critics, who has accused the Democratic presidential candidate of lying about his wartime record to win medals, contradict his own version of events.

In newspaper interviews and a best-selling book, Larry Thurlow, who commanded a Navy Swift boat alongside Kerry in Vietnam, has strongly disputed Kerry's claim that the Massachusetts Democrat's boat came under fire during a mission in Viet Cong-controlled territory on March 13, 1969. Kerry won a Bronze Star for his actions that day.

But Thurlow's military records, portions of which were released yesterday to The Washington Post under the Freedom of Information Act, contain several references to "enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire" directed at "all units" of the five-boat flotilla. Thurlow won his own Bronze Star that day, and the citation praises him for providing assistance to a damaged Swift boat "despite enemy bullets flying about him."

As one of five Swift boat skippers who led the raid up the Bay Hap River, Thurlow was a direct participant in the disputed events. He is also a leading member of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a public advocacy group of Vietnam veterans dismayed by Kerry's subsequent antiwar activities, which has aired a controversial television advertisement attacking his war record.

In interviews and written reminiscences, Kerry has described how his 50-foot patrol boat came under fire from the banks of the Bay Hap after a mine explosion disabled another U.S. patrol boat. According to Kerry and members of his crew, the firing continued as an injured Kerry leaned over the bow of his ship to rescue a Special Forces officer who was blown overboard in a second explosion.

Last month, Thurlow swore in an affidavit that Kerry was "not under fire" when he fished Lt. James Rassmann out of the water. He described Kerry's Bronze Star citation, which says that all units involved came under "small arms and automatic weapons fire," as "totally fabricated."

"I never heard a shot," Thurlow said in his affidavit, which was released by Swift Boats Veterans for Truth. The group claims the backing of more than 250 Vietnam veterans, including a majority of Kerry's fellow boat commanders.

A document recommending Thurlow for the Bronze Star noted that all his actions "took place under constant enemy small arms fire which LTJG THURLOW completely ignored

in providing immediate assistance" to the disabled boat and its crew. The citation states that all other units in the flotilla also came under fire.

"It's like a Hollywood presentation here, which wasn't the case," Thurlow said last night after being read the full text of his Bronze Star citation. "My personal feeling was always that I got the award for coming to the rescue of the boat that was mined. This casts doubt on anybody's awards. It is sickening and disgusting."

Thurlow said he would consider his award "fraudulent" if coming under enemy fire was the basis for it. "I am here to state that we weren't under fire," he said. He speculated that Kerry could have been the source of at least some of the language used in the citation.

In a telephone interview Tuesday evening after he attended a Swift Boat Veterans strategy session in an Arlington hotel, Thurlow said he lost his Bronze Star citation more than 20 years ago. He said he was unwilling to authorize release of his military records because he feared attempts by the Kerry campaign to discredit him and other anti-Kerry veterans.

The Post filed an independent request for the documents with the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, which is the central repository for veterans' records. The documents were faxed to The Post by officials at the records center yesterday.

Thurlow and other anti-Kerry veterans have repeatedly alleged that Kerry was the author of an after-action report that described how his boat came under enemy fire. Kerry campaign researchers dispute that assertion, and there is no convincing documentary evidence to settle the argument. As the senior skipper in the flotilla, Thurlow might have been expected to write the after-action report for March 13, but he said that Kerry routinely "duked the system" to present his version of events.

For much of the episode, Kerry was not in a position to know firsthand what was happening on Thurlow's boat, as Kerry's boat had sped down the river after the mine exploded under another boat. He later returned to provide assistance to the stricken boat.

Thurlow, an oil industry worker and former teacher in Kansas, said he was angry with Kerry for his antiwar activities on his return to the United States and particularly Kerry's claim before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that U.S. troops in Vietnam had committed war crimes "with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command."

"'Upset' is too mild a word," said Thurlow, a registered Republican, of his reaction to Kerry then. "He did it strictly for his own personal political gain, and it directly affected every single one of us as we were trying to put our lives together."

Two other Swift boat skippers who were direct participants in the March 13, 1969, mine explosion on the Bay Hap, Jack Chenoweth and Richard Pees, have said they do not remember coming under "enemy fire." A fourth commander, Don Droz, who was one of Kerry's closest friends in Vietnam, was killed in action a month later.

The incident featured prominently in an anti-Kerry television ad produced by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth earlier this month. "John Kerry lied to get his Bronze Star," says Van Odell, a gunner on PCF-23, one of the boats that came to the rescue of the stricken boat. "I know. I was there."

The Bronze Star controversy is also a major focus of an anti-Kerry book by John E. O'Neill, "Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry," which will hit No. 2 on The Post's bestseller list this weekend. The book accuses Kerry of "fleeing the scene" and lying repeatedly about his role.

Members of Kerry's crew have come to his defense, as has Rassmann, the Special Forces officer whom he fished from the river. Rassmann says he has vivid memories of being fired at from both banks after he fell into the river and as Kerry came to his rescue. The two had an emotional reunion on the eve of the Iowa Democratic caucuses in January, an event that some political analysts believe helped swing votes to Kerry at a crucial time.

The Bronze Star recommendations for both Kerry and Thurlow were signed by Lt. Cmdr. George M. Elliott, who received reports on the incident from his base in the Gulf of Thailand. Elliott is a supporter of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and has questioned Kerry's actions in Vietnam. But he has refused repeated requests for an interview after issuing conflicting statements to the Boston Globe about whether Kerry deserved a Silver Star. He was unreachable last night.

Money has poured into Swift Boat Veterans for Truth since the group launched its television advertisement attacking Kerry earlier this month. According to O'Neill, the group has received more than \$450,000 over the past two weeks, mainly in small contributions. The Dallas Morning News reported yesterday that the organization has also received two \$100,000 checks from Houston home builder Bob Perry, who backed George W. Bush's campaigns for Texas governor and for president.

Bush campaign officials have said they have no connection to Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, which is not permitted to coordinate its activities with a presidential campaign under federal election law.

COMMANDER
UNITED STATES NAVAL FORCES
VIETNAM

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting
the Bronze Star Medal to

LARRY RAYMOND THURLOW
LIEUTENANT (JUNIOR GRADE)
UNITED STATES NAVAL RESERVE

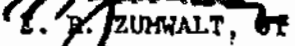
for service as set forth in the following

CITATION

"For heroic achievement while serving with Coastal Division ELEVEN engaged in armed conflict against Viet Cong communist aggressors in An Xuyen Province, Republic of Vietnam on 13 March 1969. Lieutenant (junior grade) THURLOW was serving as Officer in Charge of Inshore Patrol Craft 51, one of five boats conducting a SEA LORDS operation in the Bay Hap river. While exiting the river, a mine detonated under another Inshore Patrol Craft. At the same time, all units began receiving enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire from the river banks. Lieutenant (junior grade) THURLOW immediately directed the coxswain of his boat to assist the damaged Inshore Patrol Craft. Despite enemy bullets flying about him, he leaped aboard the damaged boat and began rendering first aid and assessing damage to the boat. While attending to the forward gunner, he was knocked overboard. He managed to remain afloat until pulled from the water. He quickly radioed for medical evacuation of the wounded and, while still under fire, with complete disregard for his personal safety, returned aboard the damaged Inshore Patrol Craft. Lieutenant (junior grade) THURLOW remained aboard the stricken boat until it had safely cleared the area. His actions and courage in the face of enemy fire were instrumental in the medical evacuation of the wounded and salvaging the damaged Inshore Patrol Craft and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

Lieutenant (junior grade) THURLOW is authorized to wear the Combat "V".

For the President


E. B. ZUMWALT, JR.
Vice Admiral, U. S. Navy
Commander U. S. Naval Forces, Vietnam

Finished File Pers E242

AWARD RECOMMENDATION
 NAVPERS 1650/4 (3-67) 57N-0105-902-8150

DATE: 23 March 1969

INSTRUCTIONS

(Originating command fill in all information available and forward to immediate superior.)

Via addressee utilize file in endorsement. Attach additional sheets as necessary to amplify recommendation.

1. FROM: Commander Coastal Division ELEVEN FPO San Francisco, California 96629		2. TO: Commander Coastal Squadron ONE FPO San Francisco, California 96697	
3. FILE/SERV. NO. 704377	4. NAME (Last, first, initial) THURLOW, Larry Raymond	5. RANK/RATE LTJG	6. OFF. DESIGNATOR 1105
7. BR. OF SERV. USNR	8. SOCIAL SECURITY NO. [REDACTED]	9. EXP. OF EM. OR OBL. SERV. Indefinite	10. ESTIMATED DEPARTMENT DATE April 1969
11. STATUS <input type="checkbox"/> REGULAR <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RESERVE		12. PERMANENT ADDRESS [REDACTED]	
13. NAME OF PRESENT UNIT Coastal Division ELEVEN		14. PLACE OF BIRTH [REDACTED]	
15. NAME OF UNIT AT TIME OF ACTION/SERVICE Coastal Division ELEVEN		16. DUTY ASSIGNMENT Officer-in-Charge, PCF	
17. NAME OF AWARD RECOMMENDED Bronze Star Medal		18. DUTY ASSIGNMENT Officer-in-Charge, PCF	
19. COMBAT 'V' RECOMMENDED <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		20. AREA WHERE ACTION TOOK PLACE An Xuyen Province, RVN	
21. PREVIOUS DECORATIONS RECEIVED AND DATES OF ACTION (Dut Unit Awards, campaign and service medals) NONE		22. DATE OR DATES OF ACTION/SERVICE 13 March 1969	
23. DECORATIONS RECOMMENDED BUT NOT YET ACTED ON (INCLUDE DATES OF ACTION/SERVICE COVERED) NONE		24. OTHERS BEING RECOMMENDED FOR SAME ACTION/SERVICE (Name, rank, service number, branch of service and award recommended) J. F. KERRY, LTJG, 713525/1105, USNR Bronze Star Medal R. E. LAMBERT, RD1, 484 19 67, USN Bronze Star Medal	
25. EYEWITNESSES (Name, rank, service number, branch of service - attach statements if required) R. E. LAMBERT, RD1, 484 19 67, USN		26. SUMMARY OF ACTION (Include dates, assignment, location, weather, enemy and friendly strength and disposition, casualties, action justifying the award - When Medal of Honor is recommended append free hand sketch of action) On 13 March 1969, LTJG THURLOW was serving as Officer-in-Charge of PCF-51, conducting a five boat Sea Lords operation in the Bay Hap River and Dong Cung canal together with ground units. After sweeping the area for five hours, the boats extracted the ground troops and began exiting the river. Shortly after starting their exit, a mine detonated under one of the boats (PCF-3), lifting it two feet above the water and wounding everyone onboard. At the same time, all the boats came under small arms and automatic weapons fire from the river banks. LTJG THURLOW immediately directed PCF-51 to assist PCF-3, where he leaped aboard the stricken boat. Finding the entire crew either wounded or in shock, LTJG THURLOW began administering first aid, as PCF-51 backed off and provided cover fire. While administering first aid to the forward gunner, LTJG THURLOW was knocked overboard when PCF-3 ran aground out of control. Fighting a three to four knot current, LTJG THURLOW managed to stay afloat with PCF-51 rushing to his aid to pull him aboard. Once aboard, although exhausted and out of breath, LTJG THURLOW, after radiocalling for MEDEVAC and reporting the seriousness of PCF-3's casualties, returned aboard PCF-31.	

NAVYERS 1680/6 (8-67) (BACK)

28. SUMMARY OF ACTION (Cont'd)

and again administered first aid. After making the wounded comfortable, he then began damage control procedures on the boat. With the aid of one of the crewmembers who had recovered enough to assist, LTJG THURLOW was able to control the flooding until other boats came alongside to assist. LTJG THURLOW remained aboard the stricken boat until the units safely cleared the river and arrived at the support ship. All of these actions by LTJG THURLOW took place under constant enemy small arms fire which LTJG THURLOW completely ignored in providing immediate assistance to the boat and crew.

29. I certify that the facts contained herein are known to me.

NAME, RANK, TITLE OF ORIGINATOR

G. M. ELLIOTT, LCDR, COMCOSDIV ELEVEN

SIGNATURE

G. M. Elliott

30. FIRST ENDORSEMENT

From: Commander Coastal Squadron ONE
To: Commander U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam

Date: 1 April 1969

- Via: (1)
(2)
(3)

1. Forwarded, readdressed.

2. Basic recommendation is concurred in. Recommend modification of recommendation (See attached sheet)

Approval not recommended for the following reason(s):

Copy to:
COMPHIBPAC
COMCNSFLOT ONE

C. F. HORNE III

(Signature)

31. FORWARDING ENDORSEMENTS BY VIA ADDRESSEE(S)

VIA	RECOMMENDATION	DATE RECEIVED	DATE FORWARDED	RANK, SIGNATURE AND TITLE
1				
2				
3				

32. BRONZE STAR MEDAL APPROVED

BRONZE STAR MEDAL APPROVED

SIGNATURE

S. EDELMAN

Assistant Chief of Staff for Personnel and Administration

DATE

6/20/69

to fish Jim Rassmann out of the water -- not under fire -- after no return fire occurred.

4. I read recently Kerry's after-action report on the incident and his Bronze Star citation. They are totally fabricated. There was no "5,000" meters (i.e., two and one-half miles) of intense fire. I never heard a shot. When the chips were down on March 13, 1969 (and on other days), one could not depend on John Kerry. I would never depend on him. Indeed, several of our fellow officers, such as Captain Tom Wright, USNR (retired), would not operate with Kerry.

Further affiant saith not.

Larry Thurlow

Larry Thurlow

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 22 day
of July, 2004.

Joanne Johnson

Notary Public

My commission expires:

7/8/05

