

T H R E E

# THE PURPLE HEART HUNTER

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“Many took exception to the Purple Hearts awarded to Kerry. His ‘wounds’ were suspect, so insignificant as to not be worthy of the award of such a medal. That Kerry would seek the Purple Heart for such ‘wounds’ is a mockery of the intent of the Purple Heart and an abridgement of the valor of those to whom the Purple Heart had been awarded with justification.”

WILLIAM FRANKE

Swift Boat veteran

**A** normal tour of duty in Vietnam was at least one year for all personnel. Many sailors, like Tom Wright (who would later object to operating with Kerry in Vietnam) and Steven Gardner (the gunner’s mate who sat behind and above Kerry for most of his Vietnam stay and came to regard him as incompetent and dishonest), stayed for longer periods either because of the special needs of the Navy or because they had volunteered to do so. With very few exceptions in the history of Swift Boats in Vietnam, everyone served a one-year tour unless he was seriously wounded. One exception was John Kerry, who requested to leave Vietnam after four months, citing an

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obscure regulation that permitted release of personnel with three Purple Hearts. John Kerry is also the only known Swiftee who received the Purple Heart for a self-inflicted wound.

None of Kerry's Purple Hearts were for serious injuries. They were concededly minor scratches at best, resulting in no lost duty time. Each Purple Heart decoration is very controversial, with considerable evidence (and in two of the cases, with incontrovertible and conclusive evidence) that the minor injuries were caused by Kerry's own hand and were not the result of hostile fire of any kind. They are a subject of ridicule within our unit. "I did get cut a few times, but I forgot to recommend myself for a Purple Heart. Sorry about that," wrote John Howland, a boat commander with call sign "Gremlin."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, many Swiftees have now come forth to question Kerry's deception. "I was there the entire time Kerry was and witnessed two of his war 'wounds.' I was also present during the action [in which] he received his Bronze Star. I know what a fraud he is. How can I help?" wrote Van Odell, a gunner from Kerry's unit in An Thoi.<sup>2</sup> Commander John Kipp, USN (retired), of Coastal Division 13 also volunteered, "If there is anything I can do to unmask this charlatan, please let me know. He brings disgrace to all who served."

Swiftees have remarked that, if Kerry faked even one of these awards, he owes the Navy 243 additional days in Vietnam before he runs for anything. In a unit where terribly wounded personnel like Shelton White (now an undersea film producer who records specials for *National Geographic*) chose to return to duty after three wounds on the same day, Kerry's actions were disgraceful. Indeed, many share the feelings of Admiral Roy Hoffmann, to whom all Swiftees reported: Kerry simply "bugged out" when the heat was on.

For military personnel no medal or award (with the exception of the Congressional Medal of Honor) holds the significance of the Purple Heart. John O'Neill remembers witnessing, as a five-year-old

child, the presentation of the Purple Heart to his widowed aunt, standing with her five children, at a memorial service for his uncle, a fighter pilot lost in Korea. Many remember the Purple Heart pinned on the pillows of the badly wounded in military hospitals throughout the world during America's wars in defense of freedom. For this reason, there were those in Coastal Division 11 who turned down Purple Hearts because, when the medals were offered, these honorable men felt they did not really deserve them. Veteran Gary Townsend wrote, "I was on PCF 3 [from] 1969 to 1970... I also turned down a Purple Heart award (which required seven stitches) offered to me while in Nam because I thought a little cut was insignificant as to what others had suffered to get theirs."<sup>3</sup>

To cheat by getting a Purple Heart from a self-inflicted wound would be regarded as befitting the lowest levels of military conduct. To use such a faked award to leave a combat sector early would be lower yet. Finally, to make or use faked awards as the basis for running for president of the United States, while faulting one's political opponents for not having similar military decorations, would represent unbelievable hypocrisy and the truly bottom rung of human conduct. Anyone engaging in such conduct would be unfit for even the lowest rank in the Navy, to say nothing of the commander in chief.

## **The Purple Heart Adventure in the Boston Whaler**

### **JOHN KERRY'S STORY**

John Kerry's website presents his first Purple Heart incident in typical heroic fashion: "December 2, 1968—Kerry experiences first intense combat; receives first combat related injury."<sup>4</sup>

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As Kerry described the situation to Brinkley, who recounts the event in *Tour of Duty*, he grew bored in his first two weeks in Vietnam while awaiting the assignment of his own boat. So he volunteered for a "special mission" on a boat the Navy calls a skimmer but which Kerry knew as a "Boston whaler." The craft was a foam-filled boat, not a PCF Swift Boat. Kerry and two enlisted men were patrolling that night, as Kerry described it, "the shore off a Viet Cong-infested peninsula north of Cam Ranh." Kerry claims that he and his two crew members spent the night being "scared shitless," creeping up in the darkness on fishermen in sampans. They feared that the fishermen in sampans with no lights might be Viet Cong.

According to Kerry, the action started early in the morning, around 2 or 3 a.m., when it was still dark. Here are Kerry's words, quoted by Brinkley:

The jungle closed in on us on both sides. It was scary as hell. You could hear yourself breathing. We were almost touching the shore. Suddenly, through the magnified moonlight of the infrared "starlight scope," I watched, mesmerized, as a group of sampans glided in toward the shore. We had been briefed that this was a favorite crossing area for VC trafficking contraband.<sup>5</sup>

Kerry reports that he turned off the motor and paddled the Boston Whaler out of the inlet into the bay. Then he saw the Vietnamese pull their sampans onto the beach; they began to unload something. Kerry decided to light a flare to illuminate the area.

The entire sky seemed to explode into daylight. The men from the sampans bolted erect, stiff with shock for only an instant before they sprang for cover like a herd of panicked gazelles [Kerry] had once seen on TV's "Wild Kingdom." We opened

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fire . . . The light from the flares started to fade, the air was full of explosions. My M-16 jammed, and as I bent down in the boat to grab another gun, a stinging piece of heat socked into my arm and just seemed to burn like hell. By this time one of the sailors had started the engine and we ran by the beach, strafing it. Then it was quiet.<sup>6</sup>

That was the entire action. As Kerry explained to Brinkley, he was not about to go chasing after the Vietnamese running away. "We stayed quiet and low because we did not want to illuminate ourselves at this point," Kerry explains.

In the dead of night, without any knowledge of what kind of force was there, we were not all about to go crawling on the beach to get our asses shot off. We were unprotected; we didn't have ammunition; we didn't have cover; we just weren't prepared for that. . . . So we first shot the sampans so that they were destroyed and whatever was in them was destroyed.<sup>7</sup>

In the introduction of the incident in the book, Kerry said that it "was a half-assed action that hardly qualified as combat, but it was my first, and that made it exciting." Kerry and his crew loaded their gear in the Swift Boat that was there to cover them, and with the Boston Whaler in tow, they headed back to Cam Ranh Bay. Brinkley ends his discussion by quoting Kerry's summary, an account that again paints a larger-than-life picture:

"I felt terribly seasoned after this minor skirmish, but since I couldn't put my finger on what we had really accomplished or on what had happened, it was difficult to feel satisfied," Kerry recalled. "I never saw where the piece of shrapnel had come

from, and the vision of the men running like gazelles haunted me. It seemed stupid. My gunner didn't know where the people were when he first started firing. The M-16 bullets had kicked up the sand way to the right of them as he sprayed the beach, slowly walking the line of fire over to where the men had been leaping for cover. I had been shouting directions and trying to unjam my gun. The third crewman was locked in a personal struggle with the engine, trying to start it. I just shook my head and said, 'Jesus Christ.' It made me wonder if a year of *training* was worth anything." Nevertheless, the episode introduced Kerry to combat with the VC and earned him a Purple Heart.<sup>8</sup>

### **THE *Boston Globe's* ACCOUNT**

A somewhat different version is recounted in the Kerry biography written by the *Boston Globe* reporters. In this account, Kerry had emphasized that he was patrolling with the Boston Whaler in a free-fire curfew zone, and that "anyone violating the curfew could be considered an enemy and shot."<sup>9</sup>

By the time the *Globe* biography was written, questions had been raised about whether the incident involved any enemy fire at all. The *Globe* reporters covered this point as follows:

The Kerry campaign showed the *Boston Globe* a one-page document listing Kerry's medical treatment during some of his service time. The notation said: "3 DEC 1968 U.S. NAVAL SUPPORT FACILITY CAM RANH BAY RVN FPO Shrapnel in left arm above elbow. Shrapnel removed and apply Bacitracin dressing. Ret to duty."

The *Globe* asked the campaign whether Kerry was certain that he received enemy fire and whether Kerry remembers the Purple Heart

being questioned by a superior officer. The campaign did not respond to those specific questions and, instead, provided a written statement about the fact that the Navy did find the action worthy of a Purple Heart.<sup>10</sup>

The two men serving alongside Kerry that night had similar memories of the incident that led to Kerry's first wartime injury. William Zaldonis, who was manning an M-60, and Patrick Runyon, operating the engine, said they spotted some people running from a sampan to a nearby shoreline. When they refused to obey a call to stop, Kerry's crew began shooting. "When John told me to open up, I opened up," Zaldonis recalled. Zaldonis and Runyon both said they were too busy to notice how Kerry was hit. "I assume they fired back," Zaldonis said. "If you can picture me holding an M-60 machine gun and firing it—what do I see? Nothing. If they were firing at us, it was hard for me to tell."

Runyon, too, said that he assumed the suspected Viet Cong fired back because Kerry was hit by a piece of shrapnel. "When you have a lot of shooting going on, a lot of noise, you are scared, the adrenaline is up," Runyon said. "I can't say for sure that we got return fire or how [Kerry] got nicked. I couldn't say one way or the other. I know he did get nicked, a scrape on the arm."<sup>11</sup>

In a separate conversation, Runyon related that he never knew Kerry was wounded. So even in the *Globe* biography accounting, it was not clear that there was any enemy fire, just a question about how Kerry might have been hit with shrapnel.

The *Globe* reporters noted that, upon the group's return to base, Kerry's commander, Grant Hibbard, was very skeptical about the injury. The *Globe* account also quoted William Schachte, the officer in command for the operation. As the *Globe* reporters recount, Another person involved that day was William Schachte, who oversaw the mission and went on to become an admiral. In 2003, Schachte responded: 'It was not a very serious wound at all.'<sup>12</sup>

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Still, on Sunday, April 18, 2004, when NBC correspondent Tim Russert questioned Kerry on national television about the skimmer incident, Kerry described the incident as “the most frightening night” of his Vietnam experience. The *Globe* reporters noted that Kerry had declined to be interviewed about the Boston Whaler incident for their book. Kerry’s refusal to be interviewed may well have been because witnesses such as Commander Hibbard, Dr. Louis Letson, Rear Admiral William Schachte, and others had begun to surface, and Kerry’s fabricated story of “the most frightening night” had begun to unravel.

### **WHAT REALLY HAPPENED**

The truth is that at the time of this incident Kerry was an officer in command (OinC) under training, aboard the skimmer using the call sign “Robin” on the operation, with now-Rear Admiral William Schachte using the call sign “Batman,” who was also on the skimmer. After Kerry’s M-16 jammed, Kerry picked up an M-79 grenade launcher and fired a grenade too close, causing a tiny piece of shrapnel (one to two centimeters) to barely stick in his arm. Schachte berated Kerry for almost putting someone’s eye out. There was no hostile fire of any kind, nor did Kerry on the way back mention to PCF OinC Mike Voss, who commanded the PCF that had towed the skimmer, that he was wounded. There was no report of any hostile fire that day (as would be required), nor do the records at Cam Ranh Bay reveal any such hostile fire. No other records reflect any hostile fire. There is also no casualty report, as would have been required had there actually been a casualty.

Following “the most frightening night” of his life, to the surprise of both Schachte and the treating doctor, Louis Letson, Kerry managed to keep the tiny hanging fragment barely embedded in his arm until he arrived at sickbay a number of miles away and a considerable time later, where he was examined by Dr. Letson. Dr. Letson, who has

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never forgotten the experience, reported it to his Democratic county chairman early in the 2004 primary campaign. When Kerry appeared at sickbay, Dr. Letson asked, "Why are you here?" in surprise, observing Kerry's unimpressive scratch. Kerry answered, "I've been wounded by hostile fire." Accompanying crewmen then told Dr. Letson that Kerry had wounded himself. Dr. Letson used tweezers to remove the tiny fragment, which he identified as shrapnel like that from an M-79 (not from a rifle bullet, etc.), and put a small bandage on Kerry's arm.

The following morning Kerry appeared at the office of Coastal Division 14 Commander Grant Hibbard and applied for the Purple Heart. Hibbard, who had learned from Schachte of the absence of hostile fire and self-infliction of the "wound" by Kerry himself, looked down at the tiny scratch (which he said was smaller than a rose thorn prick) and turned down the award since there was no hostile fire.<sup>13</sup>

When we interviewed Grant Hibbard for this book, he was equally emphatic that Kerry's slight injury, in his opinion, could not possibly merit the Purple Heart:

Q: When did you first meet John Kerry?

GH: Kerry reported to my division in November 1968. I didn't know him from Adam.

Q: Can you describe the mission in which Kerry got his first Purple Heart?

GH: Kerry requested permission to go on a skimmer operation with Lieutenant Schachte, my most senior and trusted lieutenant, using a Boston Whaler to try to interdict a Viet Cong movement of arms and munitions. The next morning at the briefing, I was informed that no enemy fire had been received on that mission. Our units had fired on some VC units running on the beach. We were all in my office, some of the crew members,

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I remember Schachte being there. This was thirty-six years ago; it really didn't seem all that important at the time. Here was this lieutenant, junior grade, who was saying "I got wounded," and everybody else, the crew that were present were saying, "We didn't get any fire. We don't know how he got the scratch." Kerry showed me the scratch on his arm. I hadn't been informed that he had any medical treatment. The scratch didn't look like much to me; I've seen worse injuries from a rose thorn.

Q: Did Kerry want you to recommend him for a Purple Heart?

GH: Yes, that was his whole point. He had this little piece of shrapnel in his hand. It was tiny. I was told later that Kerry had fired an M-79 grenade and that he had misjudged it. He fired it too close to the shore, and it exploded on a rock or something. He got hit by a piece of shrapnel from a grenade that he had fired himself. The injury was self-inflicted, that's what made sense to me. I told Kerry to "forget it." There was no hostile fire, the injury was self-inflicted for all I knew, besides it was nothing really more than a scratch. Kerry wasn't getting any Purple Heart recommendation from me.

Q: How did Kerry get a Purple Heart from the incident then?

GH: I don't know. It beats me. I know I didn't recommend him for a Purple Heart. Kerry probably wrote up the paperwork and recommended himself, that's all I can figure out. If it ever came across my desk, I don't have any recollection of it. Kerry didn't get my signature. I said "no way" and told him to get out of my office.<sup>14</sup>

Amazingly, Kerry somehow "gamed the system" nearly three months later to obtain the Purple Heart that Hibbard had denied. How he obtained the award is unknown, since his refusal to execute

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Standard Form 180 means that whatever documents exist are known only to Kerry, the Department of Defense, and God. It is clear that there should be numerous other documents, but only a treatment record reflecting a scratch and a certificate signed three months later have been produced. There is, of course, no "after-action" hostile fire or casualty report, as occurred in the case of every other instance of hostile fire or casualty. This is because there was no hostile fire, casualty, or action on this "most frightening night" of Kerry's Vietnam experience. Dr. Louis Letson agreed with Grant Hibbard. Kerry's injury was minor and probably self-inflicted:

The incident that occasioned my meeting with Lieutenant Kerry began while he was patrolling the coast at night just north of Cam Ranh Bay where I was the only medical officer for a small support base. Kerry returned from that night on patrol with an injury.

Kerry reported that he had observed suspicious activity on shore and fired a flare to illuminate the area. According to Kerry, they had been engaged in a firefight, receiving small arms fire from on shore. He said that his injury resulted from this enemy action.

The story he told was different from what his crewmen had to say about that night. Some of his crew confided that they did not receive any fire from shore, but that Kerry had fired a grenade round at close range to the shore. The crewman who related this story thought that the injury was from a fragment of the grenade shell that had ricocheted back from the rocks.

That seemed to fit the injury I treated.

What I saw was a small piece of metal sticking very superficially in the skin of Kerry's arm. The metal fragment measured about one centimeter in length and was about two or three mil-

limeters in diameter. It certainly did not look like a round from a rifle. I simply removed the piece of metal by lifting it out of the skin with forceps. I doubt that it penetrated more than three or four millimeters. It did not require probing to find it, nor did it require any anesthesia to remove it. It did not require any sutures to close the wound. The wound was covered with a band-aid. No other injuries were reported and I do not recall that there was any injury to the boat.

Lieutenant Kerry's crew related that he had told them that he would be president one day. He liked to think of himself as the next JFK from Massachusetts. I remember that Jess Carreon was present at the time and he, in fact, made the entry into Lieutenant Kerry's medical record.<sup>15</sup>

Both Hibbard and Letson wondered why Kerry had even bothered to go to the dispensary. Kerry's report of the injury as a combat injury seemed at best to be exaggerated. The crewmen present maintained that there was no evidence of enemy fire, and their conclusion was that Kerry had been hit by a fragment of his own grenade.

Kerry's proponents have also pointed to a fitness report for Kerry that was filed by Hibbard rating Kerry "excellent" as proof that Kerry's service in Cam Ranh was unusually good. In reality, the Kerry fitness report (which leaves fourteen of the eighteen categories, including "integrity," marked "unobserved") is a marginal report. Hibbard has stated that he wished to provide in the report a mediocre evaluation without permanently destroying Kerry, given his short four-week period of evaluation. At the time the report was made, Hibbard did not know of Kerry's later-finagled first Purple Heart.

Most Swiftees who were with Kerry at Cam Ranh Bay never knew until Kerry decided to run for president that he had somehow successfully maneuvered his way to this undeserved Purple Heart.

But in Kerry's own unit, Coastal Division 14, his attempt to gain the award through fraud marked him as someone who could never be trusted. When Kerry was dispatched to go to An Thoi with Lieutenant Tedd Peck (now Captain, USNR, retired), Peck told him, "Kerry, follow me no closer than a thousand yards. If you get any closer, I'll teach you what a real Purple Heart is."

## **A Trip to An Thoi**

In contrast to the pretty beaches and placid existence at Cam Ranh Bay where Kerry was stationed, Coastal Division 11 was engaged in a gritty struggle against a North Vietnamese base area, deep in the mangrove swamps in the extreme south and west of Vietnam. This area, commonly known as the U Minh and Nam Can forests, had been under North Vietnamese control since the 1940s and was used for POW camps. Most POWs never left these camps. The city of Nam Can, one of the few free outposts in the area, had been overrun by the North Vietnamese in February 1968. Swift operations in the area were supported from an offshore outpost at An Thoi, located on an island off the coast.

The ultimate commander of United States Naval and Coast Guard forces in Vietnam, Admiral Elmo "Bud" Zumwalt III developed a strategy—with enthusiastic support of then-Captain Roy Hoffmann—to use underutilized offshore naval assets to rip control of area waterways from the North Vietnamese. His model was the Mississippi River campaigns of the Civil War, which had effectively used specialized craft.

Zumwalt was deeply admired by almost all Swiftees. A hero in World War II, Zumwalt was also later known as the man who brought women to the Naval Academy and into full participation in the Navy. He was also recognized as a crusader against racism. Zumwalt was a

visionary whose sponsorship of missile ships and other innovations mark today's Navy. He also often rode into danger with the Swiftees. Kerry's later charge on *Meet the Press* in April 1971 that Zumwalt and others were war criminals cut deeply at the heart of Swiftees. Perhaps part of Kerry's unjustifiable attack on Zumwalt was motivated by the fact that it was Zumwalt's decision to use Swift Boats on dangerous riverine missions that ended with Kerry's hopes of avoiding action.

## THE DINNER THAT NEVER HAPPENED

### *Kerry's Fictitious Journal Account*

In Kerry's account of the An Thoi transfer, he makes up an entire conversation with the skipper of the landing ship tank (LST) who Kerry claims invited him and Peck for dinner on their way to An Thoi. As Kerry told the story in *Tour of Duty*, the LST captain launched into a discussion about his role in what had become known as the "Bo De massacre." According to the version of the story told by Kerry, the LST captain presented a defensive account, attempting to correct a *Stars and Stripes* story criticizing him for LST covering fire that had supposedly fallen short, exposing Swiftees on the mission to unnecessary casualties.

But according to Captain Peck's recollection and that of Kerry's crewman Steven Gardner, he and Kerry were at the LST only a few minutes for refueling, not enough time for a comfortable dinner with the LST captain—and there was no conversation about "the massacre" as described by Kerry. Even more significant, Kerry's account of the "Bo De massacre" is a breathtaking lie. In *Tour*, Kerry presents the first Swift incident on the Bo De as a "massacre" of Swiftees with seventeen wounded caused by the incompetence of all commanders whom he chose to blame rather than the vagaries of war or the enemy. Kerry's fabrication comes even though he was not there. Joe Ponder was there as a Swiftie on the mission in question. Today, still

badly disabled and on crutches from the incident, Ponder says, “There were only three persons wounded—not seventeen as Kerry states—and I was the first. I do not understand his criticism of our officers. I’ve always been proud of our officers.”

Ponder maintains today that the person who truly shamed and offended him was John Kerry, whose fraudulent account of war crimes in *Tour of Duty* has led his own grandchildren to ask him, “Did you commit the war crimes John Kerry describes?” At the press conference held by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth in Washington, D.C., on May 4, 2004, Ponder was in tears, not from his wounds or the agony of standing with his braces, but from the wounds that Kerry’s lies in *Tour of Duty* had left upon his heart and his family.

## **THE BRIEF ASSIGNMENT IN AN THOI: KERRY’S VERSION**

As Kerry has admitted in *Tour of Duty*, he was ordered against his will to Coastal Division 11 in An Thoi in December 1968. Tedd Peck recalls Kerry’s constant griping about the transfer. In *Tour of Duty*, Brinkley writes that both Kerry and Peck were opposed to their assignment. Following Kerry’s account, Brinkley quotes Peck telling his men, “There was no way I was leaving Cam Ranh Bay voluntarily to go up the rivers. That was a suicide mission.”<sup>16</sup> Brinkley relates a tortured explanation of why Kerry was finally forced to accept the assignment: He claims that he missed one of the division meetings held to solicit volunteers because he was at the Air Force PX. Peck remembered Kerry distinctly objecting, saying that he had not volunteered for the war that was occurring in the Nam Can and U Minh forests. Peck believed that Kerry did not belong in the Navy. In Brinkley’s account, the one guy who got Peck’s ire up the quickest was John Kerry, who he found standoffish and condescending. “I didn’t like anything about him,” Peck proclaimed,

“Nothing.” For his part, Kerry liked Peck, and decades later recalled none of this supposed animosity between them.<sup>17</sup>

At any rate, Kerry’s time at An Thoi was short. Within a week, Kerry and the crew of PCF 44 were on their way to the less hazardous CosDiv 13, at Cat Lo. Kerry has tried to make it appear that he was disappointed at being so quickly reassigned from An Thoi. Here is the account he gave to biographer Douglas Brinkley:

“I tried to fight the change—not because we wanted to stay in An Thoi and be shot at, but because we didn’t want to have to move and resettle again,” Kerry noted. “Our mail was already lost, and the trip back against the monsoon seas promised to be nothing but a bitch. It was just that.”<sup>18</sup>

## **THE REAL REASON KERRY WAS REASSIGNED**

When they got to An Thoi, Kerry continued to object to his placement in this dangerous assignment against his will, so much so that he was given routine offshore patrols not involving any possibility of action until Coastal Division 11 could figure out a way to get rid of him. Within a week, Kerry was transferred to Coastal Division 13, headquartered near the former French resort town of Vung Tau. While Coastal Division 13 had been involved in substantial action, it was less than what Kerry avoided by his transfer. What his fellow Swiftees concluded was that Kerry had a very high regard for his own well-being and very little nerve for facing serious combat.

According to Peck, it was simply easier to get Kerry out of An Thoi than to have to listen to his constant bellyaching about how he had not volunteered for this kind of danger. Better just to get rid of Kerry and let him be somebody else’s problem.

William Franke echoes Tedd Peck’s explanation of why Kerry was so quickly transferred out of An Thoi:

Kerry vigorously protested being transferred to An Thoi, arguing that he had volunteered only for coastal patrol and not for the far more hazardous duty of missions within the inland waterways. Indeed, his objections were so strong that, upon his first assignment to An Thoi, he was transferred out within a week.<sup>19</sup>

So off Kerry went to Cat Lo, where the patrols were on wider, less dangerous rivers than the treacherous canals of the U Minh forest and Cau Mau peninsula.

## **Christmas In "Cambodia"**

Vietnam, December 1968

### **JOHN KERRY'S STORY**

If there is one story told over and over again by John Kerry since his return from Vietnam, it is the heart-wrenching tale of how he spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day illegally in Cambodia. From the early 1970s, when he used the tale as part of his proof for war crimes in Cambodia, through the mid-1980s and the 1990s, Kerry has spoken and written again and again of how he was illegally ordered to enter Cambodia.

On the floor of the U.S. Senate on March 27, 1986, Kerry launched one of his many attacks against President Reagan—this time charging that President Reagan's actions in Central America were leading the United States into yet another Vietnam, claiming that he could recognize the error of the administration's ways because he had experienced firsthand the duplicity of the Nixon administration in lying about American incursions into Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Kerry charged that he had been illegally ordered into Cambodia during Christmas 1968:

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I remember Christmas of 1968 sitting on a gunboat in Cambodia. I remember what it was like to be shot at by the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge and Cambodians, and have the president of the United States telling the American people that I was not there; the troops were not in Cambodia. I have that memory which is seared—seared—in me.<sup>20</sup>

Kerry also described, for example, for the *Boston Herald* his vivid memories of his Christmas Eve spent in Cambodia:

I remember spending Christmas Eve of 1968 five miles across the Cambodian border being shot at by our South Vietnamese allies who were drunk and celebrating Christmas. The absurdity of almost being killed by our own allies in a country in which President Nixon claimed there were no American troops was very real.<sup>21</sup>

As recently as July 7, 2004, Michael Kranish of the *Boston Globe* repeated Kerry's Christmas in Cambodia story on FOX News Channel's *Hannity & Colmes*, indicating that it was a critical turning point in Kerry's life. Kranish had no knowledge, even after his extensive study of Kerry, that he was simply repeating a total fabrication by Kerry. And Kranish was right: Study of the Christmas in Cambodia story is central to understanding John Kerry.

The story is also in the pages of the 2004 biography written by Kranish and other *Boston Globe* reporters. As we have come to expect, the story is twisted at the end to provide justification for yet another of Kerry's political ruses, this time used to justify what Kerry portrays as his noble and continuing distrust of government pronouncements:

To top it off, Kerry said later that he had gone into Cambodia, despite President Nixon's assurances to the American public that there was no combat action in this neutral territory. The young sailor began to develop a deep mistrust of the U.S. government pronouncements, he later recalled.<sup>22</sup>

Even without minimal investigation, a critical press should have been able to spot the story as a total fabrication: Richard Nixon did not become president of the United States until twenty-six days after John Kerry's Christmas in Cambodia.

## **WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: CHRISTMAS IN VIETNAM**

Despite the dramatic memories of his Christmas in Cambodia, Kerry's statements are complete lies. Kerry was never in Cambodia during Christmas 1968, or at all during the Vietnam War. In reality, during Christmas 1968, he was more than fifty miles away from Cambodia. Kerry was never ordered into Cambodia by anyone and would have been court-martialed had he gone there.

During Christmas 1968, Kerry was stationed at Coastal Division 13 in Cat Lo. Coastal Division 13's patrol areas extended to Sa Dec, about fifty-five miles from the Cambodian border. Areas closer than fifty-five miles to the Cambodian border in the area of the Mekong River were patrolled by PBRs, a small river patrol craft, and not by Swift Boats. Preventing border crossings was considered so important at the time that an LCU (a large, mechanized landing craft) and several PBRs were stationed to ensure that no one could cross the border. A large sign at the border prohibited entry. Tom Anderson, Commander of River Division 531, who was in charge of the PBRs, confirmed that there were no Swifts anywhere in the area and that they would have been stopped had they appeared.

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All the living commanders in Kerry's chain of command—Joe Strehli (Commander of CosDiv 13), George Elliott (Commander of CosDiv 11), Adrian Lonsdale (Captain, USCG and Commander, Coastal Surveillance Center at An Thoi), Rear Admiral Roy Hoffmann (Commander, Coastal Surveillance Force Vietnam, CTF 115), and Rear Admiral Art Price (Commander of River Patrol Force, CTF 116)—deny that Kerry was ever ordered to Cambodia. They indicate that Kerry would have been seriously disciplined or court-martialed had he gone there. At least three of the five crewmen on Kerry's PCF 44 boat—Bill Zaldonis, Steven Hatch, and Steve Gardner—deny that they or their boat were ever in Cambodia. The remaining two crewmen declined to be interviewed for this book. Gardner, in particular, will never forget those days in late December when he was wounded on PCF 44, not in Cambodia, but many miles away in Vietnam.

The Cambodia incursion story is not included in *Tour of Duty*. Instead, Kerry replaces the story with a report about a mortar attack that occurred on Christmas Eve 1968 “near the Cambodia border” in a town called Sa Dec, some fifty-five miles from the Cambodian border.<sup>23</sup> Somehow, Kerry's secret illegal mission to Cambodia, which he recounted on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1986, is now a firefight at Sa Dec and a Christmas day spent back at the base writing entries in his journal.

The truth is that Kerry made up his secret mission into Cambodia. Much like Kerry's many other lies relating to supposed “war crimes” committed by the U.S. military in Vietnam, the lie about the illegal Cambodian incursion painted his superiors up the chain of command—men such as Commander Strehli, Commander Elliott, Admiral Hoffmann, and Admiral Zumwalt, all distinguished Naval heroes and men of integrity—as villains faced down by John Kerry, a solitary hero in grave and exotic danger and forced illegally and against his will into harm's way.

The same sorts of lies were repeated over and over in Kerry's anti-war book, *The New Soldier*, a book filled with preposterous, false confessions of bogus war crimes committed by the participants (who were often not even real veterans) against their will and under orders from dishonest superiors. Kerry's Christmas in Cambodia typifies the sort of lie upon which Kerry has built a false persona and a political career.

The story of Christmas 1968 has one final chapter. When refueling his PCF near Dong Tam, Kerry and his crew were told that the Bob Hope USO show was at the Dong Tam base. So Kerry decided to leave his station on the river and go searching for the Bob Hope Christmas show. Unable to find the show, he risked boat and crew by unknowingly blundering into one of the most dangerous canals in Vietnam, a canal that to those who knew the area was notorious for Viet Cong ambushes. Given the easy navigation by radar and map of the rivers involved—not much more difficult than driving a car—Kerry had just performed a feat of reverse navigation worthy of Wrong Way Corrigan.

There is, of course, no record that Kerry ever informed anyone of what he did, where he was, or where he was going—all required by regulations for the safety of the boat and crew. He did, however, record the Bob Hope adventure in his journal so he could be sure to share it in *Tour of Duty*.<sup>24</sup>

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