

# CounterPunch

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## OUR LITTLE SECRETS

### KERRY'S SILVER STAR

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN  
& JEFFREY ST CLAIR

The incident that won US Navy lieutenant John Kerry his Silver Star, thus lofting him to the useful status of "war hero", occurred on February 28, 1969. His Swift boat was ferrying US "explosives experts" and some South Vietnamese soldiers up the Dong Cung river. After dropping them off, Kerry's boat came under small arms fire. Kerry turned the boat toward the source of the shots, beached the boat and opened up at the forest with the boat's .50 and .60 caliber machine guns.

By beaching the boat Kerry was disobeying standard orders forbidding this on the grounds that it made the craft and its crew a sitting duck. Kerry's motive? As crew member Michael "Duke" Medeiros explained it to Kerry's biographer, Douglas Brinkley, it was a matter of verifying kills. "We never knew whether we killed any VC or not. When fired upon, he [Kerry] wanted to beach the boat and go get the enemy."

The boat's machineguns had in fact killed a Vietnamese, described as "a VC guerilla", and they took evidence [undescribed] from the body.

The boat sped downstream and was fired on once more, by a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. Here's where accounts of the event diverge markedly, depending on the interests of the various narrators. The citation for Kerry's Silver Star describes the event this way: "With utter disregard for his own safety and the enemy rockets, he again ordered a charge on the (Kerry continued on page 2)

## Iraq, a Year Later Baghdad Diary

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

A quick way to assess American progress in Iraq is to take the four-lane highway leading west from Baghdad to the Euphrates. It is a dreary stretch of road, built by Saddam Hussein at the height of the Iran-Iraq war as his main supply route. On the way out of Baghdad, the US army has cut down or burned date palms and bushes which might give cover to guerrillas, but otherwise it does not look dangerous. In the last nine months, however, more American soldiers have been killed here - or just off the highway, in the dishevelled truck-stop towns of Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, Kaldiyah and Ramadi - than in any other part of Iraq.

Earlier this year, the US military command claimed the number of attacks on its forces was down since the capture of Saddam Hussein in December. On the other hand, soldiers in the field say that to avoid bureaucratic hassle they often don't report incidents when they come under fire. I decided to drive the seventy miles to Ramadi to see if the road was getting any safer. We never got there. On the outskirts of Baghdad we ran into a stalled convoy of tanks and armoured personnel carriers loaded onto enormous vehicle transporters. A soldier stopped us, saying: 'We discovered an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) on the road and we are trying to defuse it.' Along with other Iraqi cars and trucks, we turned off the road and drove along a track between a stagnant canal and a rubbish dump where dogs were tearing at the garbage.

After half an hour we arrived in Abu Ghraib (also the site of Iraq's largest prison), in a market full of rickety stalls selling fruit and vegetables. I stepped out

of the car to make a call on a Thuraya satellite phone. As I was talking, a US patrol drove by in their Humvees, the extra-wide jeeps used by the army. Suddenly, their vehicles stopped. Half a dozen soldiers ran towards our car, pointing their guns at our chests. They screamed, 'Get down on your knees': and 'Put your hands behind your head.' We did both. One of them snatched my Thuraya. When Mohammed al-Khazraji, the driver, said something in Arabic, a soldier shouted 'Shut the fuck up.' I said I was a British journalist. We waited on our knees until, after a few minutes, the soldiers lost interest and climbed back into a Humvee. As we drove out of Abu Ghraib, we heard the voice of a preacher at nearby mosque denouncing the occupation, saying 'the occupiers now attack everybody and make life impossible.'

A few miles further down the road, we reached the turn off for the town of Fallujah, but it was blocked by US soldiers and members of the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, one of the paramilitary organisations now being rapidly expanded. A plump Iraqi soldier, resting his hands on his sub-machine gun, said 'the Americans are carrying out a big operation and there is a big battle with the Mojahedin around a mosque in Fallujah.' He seemed to regard the American activities with little interest and pointed to a track by which we could enter Fallujah without being stopped by the cordon round the town.

This was not a particularly violent day on the road west from Baghdad. A few days earlier, a Blackhawk medical evacuation helicopter had been shot down by a heat seeking missile near Fallujah and all (IRAQ continued on page 4)

(Kerry continued from page 1)

enemy, beached his boat only ten feet from the VC rocket position, and personally led a landing party ashore in pursuit of the enemy. Upon sweeping the area an immediate search uncovered an enemy rest and supply area which was destroyed. The extraordinary daring and personal courage of Lieutenant (junior grade) KERRY in attacking the numerically superior force in the face of intense fire were responsible for the highly successful mission.”

This citation, issued by Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, was based on the incident report, written by John Kerry. Missing from the Zumwalt version was a dramatic confrontation described by Kerry 27 years later, in 1996, in the heat of a nasty re-election fight against Republican William Weld, when Kerry was seeking a third senate term. Kerry disclosed to Jonathan Carroll, writing for the New Yorker, that he had faced down a Viet Cong standing a few feet from him with a B-40 rocket launcher; “It was either going to be him or it was going to be us”, Kerry told Carroll. “It was that simple. I don’t know why it wasn’t us – I mean, to this day. He had a rocket pointed right at our boat. He stood up out of that hole, and none of us saw him until he was standing in front of us, aiming a rocket right at us, and, for whatever reason, he didn’t pull the trigger – he turned and ran. He was shocked

to see our boat right in front him. If he’d pulled the trigger, we’d all be dead. I just won’t talk about all of it. I don’t and I can’t. The things that probably really turn me I’ve never told anybody. Nobody would understand.” (Kerry may not have wanted to talk but he certainly liked to screen. The first time Kerry took Hollywood star Dana Delany to his home in the Eighties she says his big move was showing her video clips taken of him in the Navy when he was in Vietnam. She never went out with him again.)

Two of Kerry’s crew members, Medeiros and machine-gunner Tommy Belodeau, found no mystery in why the VC soldier didn’t fire his B-40 RPG launcher. The Vietnamese was effectively unarmed. He hadn’t reloaded the RPG after his first shot at Kerry’s boat as it headed down the river.

Later in that campaign year of 1996 Belodeau described the full scope of the incident to the Boston Globe’s David Warsh. Belodeau told Warsh that he opened with his M-60 machine gun on the Vietnamese man at a range of ten feet after they’d beached the boat. The machine gun bullets caught the Vietnamese in the legs, and the wounded man crawled behind a nearby hooch. At this point, Belodeau said, Kerry had seized an M-16 rifle, jumped out of the boat, gone up to the man who Belodeau says was near death, and finished him off.

When the Globe published Warsh’s account of Belodeau’s recollection, essentially accusing Kerry of a war crime, the Kerry campaign quickly led Madeiros to the press and he described how the Vietnamese, felled by Belodeau’s machinegun fire, got up, grabbed the rocket launcher and ran off down a trail through the forest and a disappeared around a bend. As Kerry set off after him, Medeiros followed. They came round the corner to find the Vietnamese once again pointing the RPG at them ten feet away. He didn’t fire and Kerry shot him dead with his rifle.

Circulating around veterans’ websites in early February of this year was an email written by Mike Morrison who, like Kerry, won a Bronze Star in Vietnam. Morrison who later went on to write speeches for Lee Iacocca, was highly suspicious of Kerry’s claims to martial glory. In a letter to his brother Ed he wrote as follows:

“I’ve long thought that John Kerry’s war record was phoney. We talked about it when you were here. It’s mainly been

instinct because, as you know, nobody who claims to have seen the action he does would so shamelessly flaunt it for political gain.

“I was in the Delta shortly after he left. I know that area well. I know the operations he was involved in well. I know the tactics and the doctrine used. I know the equipment. Although I was attached to CTF-116 (PBRs) I spent a fair amount of time with CTF-115 (swift boats), Kerry’s command. Here are my problems and suspicions:

“(1) Kerry was in-country less than four months and collected, a Bronze Star, a Silver Star and three purple hearts. I never heard of anybody with any outfit I worked with (including SEAL One, the Sea Wolves, Riverines and the River Patrol Force) collecting that much hardware so fast, and for such pedestrian actions. The Swifts did a commendable job. But that duty wasn’t the worst you could draw. They operated only along the coast and in the major rivers (Bassac and Mekong). The rough stuff in the hot areas was mainly handled by the smaller, faster PBRs. Fishy.

“(2) Three Purple Hearts but no limp. All injuries so minor that no time lost from duty. Amazing luck. Or he was putting himself in for medals every time he bumped his head on the wheel house hatch? Combat on the boats was almost always at close range. You didn’t have minor wounds. At least not often. Not three times in a row. Then he used the three purple hearts to request a trip home eight months before the end of his tour. Fishy.

“(3) The details of the event for which he was given the Silver Star make no sense at all. Supposedly, a B-40 (rocket propelled grenade) was fired at the boat and missed. Charlie jumps up with the launcher in his hand, the bow gunner knocks him down with the twin .50 (caliber machine guns), Kerry beaches the boat, jumps off, shoots Charlie, and retrieves the launcher. If true, he did everything wrong. (a) Standard procedure when you took rocket fire was to put your stern to the action and go (away) balls to the wall. A B-40 has the ballistic integrity of a Frisbee after about 25 yards, so you put 50 yards or so between you and the beach and begin raking it with your .50s. (Did you ever see anybody get knocked down with a .50 caliber round and get up? The guy was dead or dying. The rocket launcher was empty. There was no reason to go after him (except if you knew he was

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no danger to you - just flopping around in the dust during his last few seconds on earth, and you wanted some derring-do in your after-action report). And we didn't shoot wounded people. We had rules against that, too.

"Kerry got off the boat. This was a major breach of standing procedures. Nobody on a boat crew ever got off a boat in a hot area. EVER! The reason was simple. If you had somebody on the beach your boat was defenseless. It couldn't run and it couldn't return fire. It was stupid and it put his crew in danger. He should have been relieved and reprimanded. I never heard of any boat crewman ever leaving a boat during or after a firefight."

The account that makes sense to us is Belodeau's. There were three high-powered machine guns on the boat and one Vietnamese at close range on the land and Belodeau says his machinegun knocked him down. Even if the Vietnamese fighter miraculously got up and started running away down that trail, is it likely that the two would have pursued him down an unknown path on foot? Wouldn't it be more likely that the boat would have used its machineguns again, blazing away as on Kerry's own account they did, day and day and night after night?

## Kerry's Bronze Star

On March 13, 1969, two weeks after the episode that yielded the Silver Star Kerry saw his last slice of action. It got him his Bronze Star and his third purple heart, which meant he could file a request to be transferred out of Vietnam.

Kerry earned the Bronze Star by pulling another lieutenant out of the water after the latter's Swift boat had hit a mine. That same mine's detonation caused enough wake to throw Kerry against a bulkhead, bruising his arm. This was classed as a wound, which meant the third purple heart. Then, amid rifle fire, Kerry maneuvered his boat toward Lieutenant Rassman and hoisted him onto the deck.

Both boats had been on yet another mission (see the last issue of CounterPunch) ferrying Green Berets, US Navy SEALs and Nung assassins to a village. Once again they had mistakenly targeted a friendly village, where they opened fire on South Vietnamese troops who were interrogating a group of women and children lined up against a wall.

When the Green Berets and SEALs opened fire, the South Vietnamese soldiers

jumped the wall and at least ten of the women and children were killed. Meanwhile, against orders, Kerry had again left his boat and attached himself to the Nung and was, by his own words, "shooting and blowing things up". One of the Nung threw a grenade into a hut which turned out to be filled with sacks of rice. Kerry got grains of rice and some bits of metal debris embedded in his ass, the most severe wounds he sustained in Vietnam.

With three purple hearts, the Silver and Bronze Stars, Kerry now applied for reassignment as a personal aide to a senior officer in either Boston, New York or Washington DC. He ended up in New York working for Admiral Walter F. Schleich in New York. In January 1970 he applied for early discharge to run for office. As he put it, he'd decided not to join the antiwar movement but to work within the system and try and win a seat in Congress from the Third District in Massachusetts.

## Zumwalt: Kerry's "Record Would Haunt Him"

A former assistant secretary of defense and Fletcher School of Diplomacy professor, W. Scott Thompson, recalled a conversation with the late Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr. that clearly had a slightly different take on Kerry's recollection of their discussions:

"[T]he fabled and distinguished chief of naval operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, told me--30 years ago when he was still CNO [chief naval officer in Vietnam] that during his own command of U.S. naval forces in Vietnam, just prior to his appointment as CNO, young Kerry had created great problems for him and the other top brass, by killing so many noncombatant civilians and going after other non-military targets. "We had virtually to strait-jacket him to keep him under control", the admiral said. "Bud" Zumwalt got it right when he assessed Kerry as having large ambitions--but promised that his career in Vietnam would haunt him if he were ever on the national stage."

## IS YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER WORKING FOR THE PENTAGON?

BY JORGE MARISCAL

The increased presence of military recruitment programs in the nation's public schools is a little known consequence of

the Department of Defense's plans for maintaining manpower levels in coming decades. By targeting teachers, counselors, coaches, principals, and other school personnel known in Pentagon jargon as "influencers", each branch of the armed forces seeks to create a pool of unofficial recruiters who are in daily contact with young people and who can guide them towards military careers.

The centerpiece of these stealth-recruiting strategies is the Educator Workshop Program (EWP). According to the Marine Corps' EWP website, teachers and others who participate in the program: "Get a basic understanding of the Marine Corps and are better equipped to advise their students about our career opportunities. These workshops dispel the myths about recruit training and the Marine Corps' mission by providing you with a first hand experience that is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

After being bussed to boot camp, EWP participants are given a week-long glimpse of military life in a kind of ersatz "shock and awe" designed to instill enhanced respect for recruits. Experiences range from the initial harangues delivered by drill instructors to visits to weapons training activities as well as the final act of the "Crucible", the 72-hour ordeal that pushes recruits to the limits of their endurance and concludes with a patriotic spectacle complete with amplified anthems at the foot of a mock Iwo Jima Memorial.

The forty or so educators from each recruiting area who participate every year are flown to either San Diego or Parris Island, lodged in nearby hotels, and reimbursed upon their return with a \$225 per diem. The desired reaction from educators was expressed succinctly by Staff Sgt. Jesús Lora, public affairs officer for the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego: "I've talked to one from last year's Educator Workshop and she said it was an experience that will be treasured forever. She now passes the experiences she felt last year and teaches it to her students." This, of course, is precisely the point. "Influencers" are expected to communicate their excitement about their well-controlled and sanitized "experience" of boot camp to their young charges.

Not all "influencers" are welcome to the workshops. In an article written by a recruiter in Lansing, Michigan, EWP organizers were told to eliminate as work-

(Pentagon continued on page 6)