

Boston Globe

<http://www.boston.com/news/>

## Kerry faces questions over Purple Heart

By Michael Kranish,

Globe Staff, 4/14/2004

WASHINGTON -- John F. Kerry's tour of duty in Vietnam, distinguished by Silver and Bronze stars and the close-range killing of an enemy fighter, is highlighted in his campaign ads and cheered on the trail. Even the campaign of President Bush, who did not see combat, hasn't tried to make an issue of his opponent's service record.

But as the presidential campaign heats up, some Vietnam veterans are using the Internet and talk radio to question the Democratic candidate's military record. They complain that Kerry's three Purple Hearts were for minor wounds and that he left Vietnam more than six months ahead of schedule under regulations permitting thrice-wounded soldiers to depart early.

A review by the Globe of Kerry's war record in preparation for a forthcoming book, "John F. Kerry: The Complete Biography," found that the young Navy officer acted heroically under fire, in one case saving the life of an Army lieutenant. But the examination also found that Kerry's commanding officer at the time questioned Kerry's first Purple Heart, which he earned for a wound received just two weeks after arriving in Vietnam.

"He had a little scratch on his forearm, and he was holding a piece of shrapnel," recalled Kerry's commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Grant Hibbard. "People in the office were saying, 'I don't think we got any fire,' and there is a guy holding a little piece of shrapnel in his palm." Hibbard said he couldn't be certain whether Kerry actually came under fire on Dec. 2, 1968, the date in question and that is why he said he asked Kerry questions about the matter.

But Kerry persisted and, to his own "chagrin," Hibbard said, he dropped the matter. "I do remember some questions, some correspondence about it," Hibbard said. "I finally said, 'OK, if that's what happened . . . do whatever you want.' After that, I don't know what happened. Obviously, he got it, I don't know how."

Kerry declined to talk to the Globe about the issue during the preparation of the Kerry biography. But his press secretary, Michael Meehan, noted that the Navy concluded that Kerry deserved the Purple Heart.

During the Vietnam War, Purple Hearts were often granted for minor wounds. "There were an awful lot of Purple Hearts--from shrapnel, some of those might have been M-40 grenades," said George Elliott, who served as a commanding officer to Kerry during another point in his five-month combat tour in Vietnam. (Kerry earlier served a noncombat tour.) "The Purple Hearts were coming down in boxes." Under Navy regulations, an enlistee or officer wounded three times was permitted to leave Vietnam early, as Kerry did. He received all three purple hearts for relatively minor injuries -- two did not cost him a day of service and one took him out for a day or two.

The incident that led to Kerry's first Purple Heart was risky, and covert. He and his crew left the safe confines of the huge US base at Cam Ranh Bay, climbing aboard a "skimmer" boat -- a craft similar to a Boston Whaler -- to travel upriver in search of Viet Cong guerrillas. At a beach that was known as a crossing area for enemy contraband traffic, Kerry's crew spotted some people running from a sampan, a flat-bottomed boat, to a nearby shoreline, according to two men serving alongside Kerry that night, William Zaladonis and Patrick Runyon. When the Vietnamese refused to obey a call to stop, Kerry authorized firing to begin.

"I assume they fired back," Zaladonis recalled in an interview. But neither he nor Runyon saw the source of the shrapnel that lodged in Kerry's arm. "We came across the bay onto the beach and I got [hit] in the arm, got shrapnel in the arm," Kerry told the Globe in a 2003 interview. Kerry has also said he didn't know where the shrapnel came from.

Back at the base, Kerry told Hibbard he qualified for a Purple Heart, according to Hibbard. Thirty-six years later, Hibbard, reached at his retirement home in Florida, said he can still recall Kerry's wound, and that it resembled a scrape from a fingernail. "I've had thorns from a rose that were worse," said Hibbard, a registered Republican who said he was undecided on the 2004 presidential race.

The Globe asked Kerry's campaign whether the Massachusetts senator is certain he was under enemy fire and whether he recalled that a superior officer raised questions about the matter. The campaign did not respond directly to those questions. Instead, Meehan said in a prepared statement that Kerry "received the shrapnel wound early in the course of that combat engagement." Meehan also provided a copy of a medical report showing treatment for a wound on Dec. 3, 1968. The Purple Heart regulation in effect at that time said that a wound must "require treatment by a medical officer."

Nearly three months later, a document was sent to Kerry informing him that he would receive a Purple Heart "for injuries received on 2 December 1968." The Naval Historical Center, which could not locate a copy of the original card for the incident, nonetheless confirmed that Kerry did receive the Purple Heart.

Kerry went on to earn another two Purple Hearts and he led more than two dozen missions in which he often faced enemy fire. He won the Silver Star for an action in which he killed an enemy soldier who carried a loaded rocket launcher that could have destroyed Kerry's six-man patrol boat, and he won a Bronze Star for rescuing an Army lieutenant who was thrown overboard and under fire.

One reason that Kerry has long divided Vietnam veterans is because of the way he led a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War after he returned to the United States. While in Vietnam, Kerry began to question the policy of "free-fire zones," which permitted sailors to open fire on rivers where Vietnamese were violating nighttime curfews. He said in a 1971 appearance on "Meet the Press": "There are all kinds of atrocities, and I would have to say that, yes, yes, I committed the same kind of atrocities as thousands of other soldiers have committed, in that I took part in shootings in free-fire zones."

Thirty-three years later, that statement still rankles some veterans, apparently including those who have formed a group called Vietnam Veterans Against John Kerry, which has a website devoted to what it calls Kerry's association with the "radical pro-communist" antiwar movement.

The statements of that group have been circulated widely over the Internet and picked up on conservative radio talk shows.

But some historians said Kerry is being unfairly criticized over his antiwar effort, which is best remembered for his Senate testimony in which he asked why soldiers should be asked to die for a mistake. "Thirty-three years later, his testimony has really proved to be prescient," said historian Stanley Karnow, author of "Vietnam: A History." "The war was a mistake. Nobody knew better that the war was a mistake than the poor grunts out there fighting it."

Indeed, some of Kerry's crew mates who were aghast that Kerry had led them into battle and then came home to protest the war now say Kerry was ahead of his time in seeing the mistaken policy. Crew mate James Wasser, who originally felt "betrayed" by Kerry's antiwar leadership, said, "Knowing what I know now, I would have totally agreed with him."

Michael Kranish can be reached at [kranish@globe.com](mailto:kranish@globe.com)

© Copyright 2004 Globe Newspaper Company.