

A TESTIMONY OF LIES

“Lt. Kerry returned home from the war to make some outrageous statements and allegations. Numerous criminal acts in violations of the law of war were cited by Kerry, disparaging those who had fought with honor in that conflict.”

LT. COL. JAMES ZUMWALT, USMC (RETIRED)

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth Press Conference
Washington, D.C., May 4, 2004

The Fulbright Committee

Inside the committee room the television cameras were ready, lights glaring. A group of scraggly young men in a ragtag mixture of military uniforms accompanied by hippie-looking young women filled the front seats behind the witness chair. John Kerry's supporters from the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) were here to applaud their leader.

Kerry's testimony to the Fulbright Committee was a carefully orchestrated piece of political theater. Fulbright wanted a presentable,

young Kennedy-esque face to put on the antiwar effort, and Kerry wanted a national forum from which to launch his climb to political celebrity. Ted Kennedy helped arrange Kerry's testimony with Senator Fulbright at a private fundraising event held at the home of Democratic senator Philip A. Hart of Michigan.

Kerry was late. The anticipation in the room was building as the audience looked around to see if the man of the moment was anywhere in the hall. Then Kerry, slightly out of breath, burst into the hall from the back door. He charged into the room and strode directly forward to Senator Fulbright. He extended his hand, his long jaw set firmly forward. There was a sense of adrenaline about him. He worked the front of the room, approaching each senator and extending his hand, speaking softly to them as if he had known them for years, commanding the attention of all in the room, the cameras already recording the action.

As Kerry settled into the witness chair, he folded his hands in front of him, his military fatigues open at the collar to reveal his T-shirt beneath, the bands of ribbons above his left pocket—there both to call attention to his service decorations and to signal to those in the know the insult communicated by the inappropriate wearing of service bars in anything but dress uniform. His mop of hair was stylishly swept across his forehead, and his mouth was firmly closed in a thin, determined line. Kerry was ready for his cue; his studied testimony, carefully practiced, was ready for delivery. He patiently waited his moment to burst onto the national scene.

Chairman Fulbright brought the committee to order:

The committee is continuing this morning its hearings on proposals relating to the ending of the war in Southeast Asia. This morning the committee will hear testimony from Mr. John Kerry and, if he has any associates, we will be glad to hear from

them. These are men who have fought in this unfortunate war in Vietnam. I believe they deserve to be heard and listened to by the Congress and by the officials in the executive branch and by the public generally. You have a perspective that those in the Government who make our Nation's policy do not always have and I am sure that your testimony today will be helpful to the committee in its consideration of the proposals before us.

Senator Fulbright left no doubt that the committee had a political agenda and was decidedly antiwar. What were John Kerry's credentials? He was a veteran who had been in Vietnam, and his perspective opposing the war was one that Senator Fulbright wanted heard. Next, Senator Fulbright apologized that the Supreme Court had issued an injunction forbidding the VVAW protesters from camping out on the National Mall.

I would like to add simply on my own account that I regret very much the action of the Supreme Court in denying the veterans the right to use the Mall. [Applause]

Senator Fulbright left no doubt where he stood on the issue of the Vietnam War:

I have joined with some of my colleagues, specifically Senator Hart, in an effort to try to change the attitude of our Government toward your efforts in bringing to this committee and to the country your views about the war.

I personally don't know of any group that would have both a greater justification for doing it and also a more accurate view of the effect of the war. As you know, there has grown up in this town a feeling that it is extremely difficult to get accurate

information about the war and I don't know a better source than you and your associates. So we are very pleased to have you and your associates, Mr. Kerry.

John O'Neill, a Navy veteran who had also served in Vietnam in Coastal Division 11, had written to the committee asking for an opportunity to give his testimony. The committee's written response indicated that the schedule was very full and that there would be no time available. John O'Neill supported the war in Vietnam.

John Kerry began his statement:

Thank you very much, Senator Fulbright, Senator Javits, Senator Symington, Senator Pell. I would like to say for the record, and also for the men behind me who are also wearing the uniforms and their medals, that my sitting here is really symbolic. I am not here as John Kerry. I am here as one member of the group of one thousand, which is a small representation of a very much larger group of veterans in this country, and were it possible for all of them to sit at this table they would be here and have the same kind of testimony.

I would simply like to speak in very general terms. I apologize if my statement is general because I received notification yesterday you would hear me and I am afraid because of the injunction I was up most of the night and haven't had a great deal of time to prepare.

What about the cocktail party at Senator Hart's home days before? Once Kerry learned that he would have the chance to give testimony before the committee, he recruited the assistance of Adam Walinsky, a speechwriter noted for his work with Robert Kennedy. Walinsky drafted the speech and coached Kerry on its delivery. The only image

Kerry wanted us to see was a myth: a young man with a burning passion for the truth, the leader forced to sleep on the ground, the man answering his country's call to be where he was urgently needed, before a committee of the United States Senate where the senators and America were urgently waiting for his firsthand criticism of the war. He proceeded to level his charges:

I would like to talk, representing all those veterans, and say that several months ago in Detroit, we had an investigation at which over 150 honorably discharged and many very highly decorated veterans testified to war crimes committed in Southeast Asia, not isolated incidents but crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command.

It is impossible to describe to you exactly what did happen in Detroit, the emotions in the room, the feelings of the men who were reliving their experiences in Vietnam, but they did. They relived the absolute horror of what this country, in a sense, made them do.

They told the stories at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Ghengis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam in addition to the normal ravage of war, and the normal and very particular ravaging which is done by the applied bombing power of this country.

Kerry's testimony was shocking and graphic, a slap in the face to the military personnel who were at that very moment fighting and

dying in Vietnam. Yet he produced no documentation. Where were the specific incidents? Where were the affidavits? Kerry presented only unsubstantiated charges. As we will see, not only was the testimony given in Detroit at what was called the Winter Soldier Investigation unsubstantiated, but much of it was fraudulent. Kerry had the attention of the Senate; why didn't he present proof? Possibly because he had none. The core of Kerry's argument was that fighting in Vietnam was pointless:

In our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam, nothing which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom... is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy, and it is that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart.

The contrast with John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address was clear: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Kerry characterized the Vietnam War not as an effort to save the country from Communism but as a civil war or, possibly, a war waged in an effort to free the nation from colonialism, a war in which our allies, the South Vietnamese, were not defenders of freedom. He continued:

We found that not only was it a civil war, an effort by a people who had for years been seeking their liberation from any colonial influence whatsoever, but also we found that the Vietnamese

whom we had enthusiastically molded after our own image were hard put to take up the fight against the threat we were supposedly saving them from.

We found that most people didn't even know the difference between communism and democracy. They only wanted to work in rice paddies without helicopters strafing them and bombs with napalm burning their villages and tearing their country apart. They wanted everything to do with the war, particularly with this foreign presence of the United States of America, to leave them alone in peace, and they practiced the art of survival by siding with whichever military force was present at a particular time, be it Vietcong, North Vietnamese, or American.

Kerry drew a moral equivalence between the military force that we were exerting to establish liberty and the violence used by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to establish Communism. He suggested that we might be just another colonial force in that part of the world, ourselves morally wrong.

We found also that all too often American men were dying in those rice paddies for want of support from their allies. We saw firsthand how money from American taxes was used for a corrupt dictatorial regime. We saw that many people in this country had a one-sided idea of who was kept free by our flag, as blacks provided the highest percentage of casualties. We saw Vietnam ravaged equally by American bombs as well as by search and destroy missions, as well as by Vietcong terrorism, and yet we listened while this country tried to blame all of the havoc on the Vietcong.

Kerry then proceeded to a carefully crafted section, a string of “we rationalized. . . we learned. . . we watched” statements indicting American warfare in Vietnam, emphasizing his view that American racism was responsible for military abuses. This was very polished rhetoric for a speech that supposedly was thrown together overnight. Why didn’t Kerry just tell the panel the truth—that he had been working on the speech for some time and that he had professional help putting it together?

We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum.

We learned the meaning of free-fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals.

We watched the U.S. falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts. We listened while month after month we were told the back of the enemy was about to break.

We fought using weapons against “oriental human beings,” with quotation marks around that. We fought using weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting in the European theater, or let us say a non-third-world people theater.

Adam Walinsky later bragged that Kerry, the 1966 Yale class orator, was “pretty darn good” with words all by himself, but that the parts of Kerry’s speech that showed up on television were the product of his hand, not Kerry’s.¹ Yet Kerry was well aware that his main goal was to create an impression before the cameras. The entire protest

week in Washington, D.C., had been for Kerry an exercise in high political theater. While his VVAW comrades had slept on the Mall, camping out as part of their protest, Kerry and his girlfriend had slipped away to sleep in comfort, welcomed into the fancy Georgetown homes of politically sympathetic family friends.

Kerry built to his conclusion with a question that has become the most repeated part of the speech: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

The argument presented by Kerry was based on viewing the Vietnam War as a mistake. If one saw the war as an important step in the Cold War determination to stop the spread of Communism (a view held by President Johnson and President Nixon), then asking men to die was consistent with President Kennedy's pledge that we would pay such a precious price to preserve liberty in a free world.

Perhaps this is the question that needs to be asked by the American people and answered by John Kerry: Who was the last American POW to die languishing in a North Vietnamese prison, forced to listen to the recorded voice of John Kerry disgracing his service by dishonest testimony before the Senate?

Paul Galanti, a Navy pilot who was shot down over Vietnam in June 1966 and then spent seven years in Communist captivity as a POW, remembers Kerry's antiwar rhetoric all too well. Galanti told the *Los Angeles Times* in February 2004 that during torture sessions his North Vietnamese captors had cited antiwar speeches as "an example of why we should cross over to [their] side." As far as Galanti was concerned, "Kerry broke a covenant among servicemen never to make public criticisms that might jeopardize those still in battle or in the hands of the enemy." Galanti's criticism of Kerry was particularly biting: "John Kerry was a traitor to the men he served with." Now retired and in his sixties, Galanti refuses to abandon his anger

at Kerry. "I don't plan to set it aside. I don't know anyone who does," he was quoted as saying. "The Vietnam memorial has thousands of additional names due to John Kerry and others like him."²

Still, Senator Kerry refuses to consider that his testimony caused more deaths and prolonged the war in Vietnam by undermining support at home and contributing directly to a Vietnamese Communist victory.

The Winter Soldier Investigation

Kerry's testimony to the Fulbright Committee referenced the testimony given at the Winter Soldier Investigation as the basis of his conclusion that war crimes and atrocities were being committed in Vietnam. This "investigation" was supposedly his entire foundation for the charges he had made. What was the Winter Soldier Investigation? How credible was the testimony given there?

The phrase "winter soldier" was derived from pamphleteer Thomas Paine, whose *American Crisis* on December 23, 1776, contained the now-famous words referring to George Washington's troops, who braved the depths of snow and cold at Valley Forge through the bitter winter of 1777–78: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in the crisis, shrink from the services of their country; but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of men and women." The VVAW adopted the term "winter soldier" to symbolize their professed toughness, their dedication to expose what they considered the criminal behavior at the core of a war they say was immoral, the realities only a real soldier—a "winter soldier"—would have the courage to profess.

The idea for the investigation was relatively simple. A VVAW panel would call veterans as witnesses and take testimony from them about atrocities they had witnessed or committed in Vietnam. In truth, this

was not an investigation at all. There were no thorough background checks of those testifying, no independent corroboration of the testimony given, not even any sworn statements to hold those testifying to some sort of legal standard of veracity.

Why? There was a deeper political level to the agenda. More important than establishing beyond doubt that the testifying veterans had actually witnessed war crimes in Vietnam or had committed atrocities themselves, the Winter Soldier Investigation aimed to shock the public. Sensationalism, not honesty, was the operative standard.

The critical political goal was to demonstrate that the atrocities described were a direct result of U.S. military policy, not random acts of meaningless or unauthorized cruelty. This was consistent with the argument advanced by Kerry before the Fulbright Committee. The contention was that American military policy in Vietnam necessarily resulted in the commission of war crimes, that the atrocities committed were commonplace occurrences, and that military commanders condoned these war crimes as a necessary result of the orders they had issued. Otherwise, all that would be established was that the men testifying might well be just criminals. The VVAW had no intention of pointing the finger at the soldiers themselves; the goal was to indict the United States military, all the way up the chain of command to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, ultimately, to President Nixon. The government of the United States was the target. The soldiers in the field were only the pawns used to get there.

Noted extremists were involved in organizing the Winter Soldier Investigation. Jane Fonda was a key financial supporter and the honorary national coordinator of the event. This was Fonda's Mao period, complete with Viet Cong flags, red star costumes, and frequently photographed expressions of her clenched fist raised in anger. The second major financial sponsor was Mark Lane, whose 1966 book *Rush to Judgment*³ had played a key role in advancing the conspiracy theories

rampant in the years following the JFK assassination. Lane had published a new book, *Conversations with Americans*,⁴ featuring interviews with Vietnam veterans who described war crimes and atrocities. To raise money for the Winter Soldier Investigation, Fonda and Lane planned a series of fundraising concerts and speaking appearances throughout the United States prior to the hearings, focusing largely on college campuses.

The VVAW was concerned that journalist Neil Sheehan had just published a scorching *New York Times Book Review* evaluation of Lane's book, in which he established without doubt that the book was full of false tales of war horrors that never happened, based on interviews with supposed veterans who had never seen a day of military service in Vietnam.⁵ Still, the group's only corrective was to require that "witnesses" provide information about their military units and where the supposed atrocities had occurred. Witnesses were required to provide a DD-214 military discharge form as evidence of their military service.

The VVAW picked Detroit to host the Winter Soldier Investigation precisely because the city had a solid middle-America reputation. Detroit's gray winter, its smokestacks, and its automobile manufacturing plants would serve as a perfect backdrop for what the leftists wanted to bill as the common man's indictment of the war. Lane had met with Al Hubbard, an African American veteran who served as VVAW leader, in the group's headquarters at 156 Fifth Avenue in New York City. But New York itself was too "Eastern" (meaning, too "liberal") to serve as a stage for the Winter Soldier Investigation. A much better environment was an everyman's hotel, a Howard Johnson Motor Hotel, to be precise, located on a middle-class street adjacent to downtown Motown.

The room chosen for the event had no windows. Concrete support pillars peppered throughout the room's interior created "restricted

view” spots around which chairs had to be positioned so viewers could observe. On a modest raised platform in front, the “investigators” sat behind a simple wooden table resting on folding metal legs. While the event lacked television media coverage, a radical film crew had set up cameras and lights to shoot a “documentary” intended for later distribution in leftist circles. A few hundred spectators showed up, and reporters from the *Detroit Free Press* were there to cover the event.

John Kerry was at attendance at the Winter Soldiers Investigation. He listened as witness after witness presented incredible horror stories of American soldiers in Vietnam—decapitations; torturing of prisoners; firing artillery on villages for fun; corpsmen killing wounded prisoners; napalm dropped on villages; women raped; innocents, including children, massacred; and tear-gassing people for fun.⁶

Each witness had at least one truly shocking bit of testimony that allowed him to be distinguished from other witnesses, a new level of “Oh my God” horror that was his unique badge of honor. If the tale after tale of unspeakable horror actually happened, then the conclusion was inescapable that the U.S. military had become the natural home for our country’s misfits. Why would a psychopath or a sadist do anything but enlist? The opportunity for a target-rich environment for anyone’s neurosis was right here, plentifully available to U.S. soldiers serving in Vietnam. The witnesses seemed to recite a certain list of offenses that everyone just knew had happened—village burning, graphic sexual harm to women, the murder of helpless civilians often in unusually cruel manners, torturing prisoners (often in a sexual manner), killing children and babies. Reciting horrors became as an unofficial badge of courage, a required ritual for acceptance into the ranks of the antiwar activists.

The debunking of the Winter Soldier testimony began almost instantly. The *Detroit Free Press* asked for and received from the

VVAW ten days' advance warning on some of the testimony that would be given. The *Free Press*, however, reported as the hearings began that much remained uncertain, that "much of the testimony that will be heard during the three days could not be corroborated by the *Free Press* in the ten days it had to run down each account." And, again, describing the many scattered and isolated stories that the anticipated testimony would present, "Like a soldier jokingly pitching a smoke bomb into a crowd of peasants fighting over a can of discarded C-rations. Or a medic slashing his unit's identification into the flesh of a dead Vietcong soldier. Or the torturing of a prisoner by hooking generator wires to his genitals. Or the rifleman who spread plastic explosives between crackers and handed it out to Vietnamese children as snacks. There are many who may choose not to believe these stories. The Pentagon may refuse or be unable to confirm them primarily because the accounts are so vague that they amount to a 'bucket of steam.'"⁷ When the *Free Press* asked, those testifying had presented no affidavits.

At the conclusion of the Winter Soldier Investigation, antiwar senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon was so impressed with the testimony that he insisted the transcript be inserted into the congressional record. Senator Hatfield also called for a military investigation into the charges that had been made. The Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) conducted the military inquiry. In his 1980 book *America in Vietnam*, Guenter Lewy noted that the NCIS questioned the identities of many of the witnesses who had appeared before the Winter Soldier Investigation. The most damaging finding "consisted of the sworn statements of several veterans, corroborated by witnesses, that they had in fact not attended the hearing in Detroit. One of them had never been to Detroit in his life. He did not know, he stated, who might have used his name." As Lewy concluded, "The VVAW's use of fake witnesses and the failure to cooperate with military authorities

and to provide crucial details of the incidents further cast serious doubt on the professed desire to serve the causes of justice and humanity. It is more likely that this inquiry, like others earlier and later, had primarily political motives and goals."⁸

The 1998 book *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History*, by B. G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, provides a powerful debunking of supposed Vietnam War veterans falsifying or exaggerating their service records and inventing atrocity stories. Burkett served in Vietnam with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal, Vietnamese Honor Medal, and Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm. He never expected to be an author, nor did he expect to spend ten years researching Vietnam War stories. Still, the many phony stories he was hearing of Vietnam—veterans claiming acts of heroism that never happened, wildly exaggerated war records from supposed soldiers who never served, or, if they did serve, were never in Vietnam—simply stuck in his craw. Burkett characterized the Winter Soldier Investigation as “a classic example of turning reality on its head.”⁹

At the Winter Soldier Investigation, more than one hundred “veterans” and some sixteen civilians testified. Burkett reports, for example, that the National Archives can find no service records under the names of eleven of the individuals claiming to be veterans who testified at the Winter Soldier Investigation. This strongly suggests that the eleven were complete frauds, lying that they had Vietnam experience as well as lying about supposed atrocities they witnessed or committed. The likelihood is that these eleven were never in any branch of the United States military at all.

In 1970, joining the VVAW took little more effort than just showing up. Anyone with a beard, a scraggly uniform, and enough make-do information about the military and Vietnam—information readily available in a bar or a library—could become a full-fledged member.

There was no credentials committee and no background search required for membership. If your story was good enough and your demeanor at least reasonably convincing, you might even be permitted to testify in a staged inquiry like the Winter Soldier Investigation. If you were lucky, your story could get into the press, and you would experience a limited form of celebrity, despite the fact that the whole charade was based on a lie.

Both the Winter Soldier Investigation and John Kerry's testimony before the Fulbright Committee played against the national publicity given the My Lai massacre. A military court-martial had just convicted Lieutenant William Calley of murdering twenty-two unarmed civilians in the March 16, 1968, massacre. Rather than seeing this as an isolated incident of extreme violence that was duly punished, the opponents of the Vietnam War preferred to use the incident to support their favorite argument, namely, that all U.S. military personnel in Vietnam were committing atrocities in their normal course of duty.

When Senator Claiborne Pell of the Foreign Relations Committee questioned Kerry about Calley and My Lai, Kerry echoed the theme:

My feeling, Senator, on Lieutenant Calley is what he did quite obviously was a horrible, horrible, horrible thing and I have no bone with the fact that he was prosecuted. But I think that in this question you have to separate guilt from responsibility, and I think clearly the responsibility for what has happened there lies elsewhere.

I think it lies with the men who designed free-fire zones. I think it lies with the men who encouraged body counts. I think it lies in large part with this country which allows a young child before he reaches the age of fourteen to see 12,500 deaths on

television, which glorifies the John Wayne syndrome, which puts out fighting-man comic books on the stands, which allows us in training to do calisthenics to four counts, on the fourth count of which we stand up and shout "kill" in unison, which has posters in barracks in this country with a crucified Vietnamese, blood on him, and underneath it says "kill the gook," and I think clearly the responsibility for all of this is what has produced this horrible aberration.

Those who were then serving honorably in Vietnam or who had served honorably in Vietnam got John Kerry's message loud and clear: He was painting them all as criminals.

Yet if Kerry's argument was correct and atrocities were the expected direct result of military orders, then Calley should never have been punished; instead, he should have been decorated. After all, Kerry and his VVAW associates were arguing that genocide was a natural consequence of official military policy in Vietnam.

"Gooks" was a derisive term and bears closer scrutiny. A key charge in the antiwar movement's indictment of the Vietnam War was that it was racist. Put in the simplest terms, antiwar activists were charging that America did not value the lives of Asians. As evidence for that argument, antiwar apologists argued that African Americans were disproportionately drafted into the military and put in combat because a racist America sought to wage the war to the disadvantage of our own country's racial minorities.

By 1971, an alliance had formed between antiwar protesters and extremist groups supporting African American civil rights, including the Black Panthers. For a time, the VVAW sought to maintain a middle-of-the-road approach in the protest community, trying to distance itself from the clearly revolutionary and generally Communist

groups such as Students for a Democratic Society or the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice. After all, the members of the VVAW were supposedly combat veterans. Still, VVAW members appeared comfortable with their more revolutionary brothers' and sisters' Marxism and Leninism, even if they themselves were not openly Communist.

Kerry and his activist friends also "demonized" American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. As Kerry characterized the situation, the Vietnam veteran returning home was a "misfit," warped by his experiences, doomed to suffer. John Kerry in 1971 was the perfect spokesperson for the VVAW. The American public in 1971 was not ready to listen to yet another fist-clenched, loudmouthed, bearded youth with an angry cause. Kerry was different. He was nicely dressed and well groomed, even when he put on his military fatigues war-protester outfit. That is what was so disarming about John Kerry: One had to listen closely to him to realize he was advocating a very radical position. He invited one to look at him first, to see his mop of thick hair, his lanky frame, his jutting jaw of determination. But there was virtually no substantiation behind his rhetoric.

From virtually nowhere, John Kerry became a star of the antiwar movement. On the day of his Fulbright Committee testimony, the news media was already talking about John Kerry running for president. Kerry had demonstrated that he knew how best to utilize the value of a stage, even if the speech he gave on that stage was nothing but a lie.

Kerry's false allegations had a profound and long-lasting effect on the American public's view of the Vietnam-era military. Soldiers returning from Vietnam were treated with a degree of contempt that has no parallel in American history, and the image of Vietnam veterans as murderous, drug-addled psychotics persists in American culture to this day.

“Skid Row”

Marine First Lieutenant Jim Warner had had a rough time, even for a POW in the gulag of North Vietnam in the spring of 1969. Having been interrogated and tortured for four months by the North Vietnamese, who threatened to hold him after the war for trial as a war criminal, Warner (once the proud backseat navigator of a Phantom jet) had just been transferred by the North Vietnamese to the “place for punishment” outside Hanoi known by the prisoners as “Skid Row.” Just as things didn’t seem that they could get much worse, they did.

An interrogator confronted Warner with testimony from his own mother and father asking for his return at John Kerry’s Winter Soldier Investigation hearings. He told Warner, “Even your parents know you are a war criminal.”¹⁰ The interrogator showed Warner a large piece of cardboard with photographs of John Kerry and news clippings relating to Kerry’s Senate testimony and demonstrations and said that “everyone knows you are a war criminal.” Warner had resisted beyond caring, but he hoped that the North Vietnamese had made it all up. Upon reviewing his mother’s testimony in *The New Soldier*, Warner asked: “What kind of ghoul would exploit my mother and family to claim I was a war criminal while I was in a North Vietnamese prison? How could someone do something like this for political advantage?”

Lieutenant General John Flynn, distinguished as one of the three highest-ranking POWs in Vietnam, met John O’Neill at a 1977 party in San Antonio. Lieutenant General Flynn thanked O’Neill profusely for having debated John Kerry in 1971 on the *Dick Cavett Show*, while he had been in captivity in Vietnam. He said that he and his fellow POWs would never forget the lies of Kerry and the VVAW that the North Vietnamese had presented to them to break their spirits. He described the hollow feeling they shared when they saw pictures

or read testimony of their fellow veterans in the United States betraying the bond that sustained them in the POW camps.

Admiral Jeremiah Denton and many other POWs never forgot the North Vietnamese attempt to use “war crimes” claims from their own fellow veterans, led by Kerry, against them. Ron Bliss, a POW for five years, has spent thirty years trying to forget the small cells with a single speaker and his sense of betrayal and loneliness resulting from the claims of the North Vietnamese jailers that his military “comrades” in the VVAW had testified to his alleged guilt. Navy Lieutenant Paul Galanti felt particularly betrayed that a fellow Navy lieutenant would sell him out with false war crimes charges, cited over and over by the North Vietnamese as proof that he had committed war crimes and should confess.

Words once spoken cannot be taken back. Kerry’s false words, so conducive to a quick bubble of popularity in 1971, caused untold grief, beginning first with the POWs languishing in North Vietnamese jails and then in camps from Laos to Cambodia to the Cau Mau peninsula of South Vietnam. Many of these POWs never made it home. John Kerry’s words, his book *The New Soldier*, and his organization, the VVAW, likewise gave birth to the now thirty-year-old caricature of U.S. soldiers as drug-sated criminals. No foreign enemy ever dealt so direct and devastating a blow to the morale of America’s armed forces and its veterans than John Kerry did. He struck directly—and falsely—at the honor of their service, the glue binding all units together.

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth React

The Swift Boat veterans who came to Washington, D.C., on May 4, 2004, to hold a press conference opposing John Kerry’s presidential bid were strongly opposed, even after some thirty-five years, to Kerry’s antiwar statements:

I served with these guys. I went on missions with them, and these men served honorably. Up and down the chain of command there was no acquiescence to atrocities. It was not condoned, it did not happen, and it was not reported to me verbally or in writing by any of these men including Lieutenant (jg) Kerry.

In 1971–72, for almost eighteen months, he stood before the television audiences and claimed that the five hundred thousand men and women in Vietnam, and in combat, were all villains—there were no heroes. In 2004, one hero from the Vietnam War has appeared, running for president of the United States and commander in chief. It just galls one to think about it.

—*Captain George Elliott, USN (retired)*

I was in An Thoi from June of '68 to June of '69, covering the whole period that John Kerry was there. I operated in every river, in every canal, and every off-shore patrol area in the 4th Corps area, from Cambodia all the way around to the Bo De River. I never saw, even heard of all these so-called atrocities and things that we were supposed to have done.

This is not true. We're not standing for it. We want to set the record straight.

—*William Shumadine*

In 1971, when John Kerry spoke out to America, labeling all Vietnam veterans as thugs and murderers, I was shocked and almost brought to my knees because even though I had served at the same time and in the same unit, I had never witnessed or participated in any of the events that the senator had accused us of. I strongly believe that the statements made by the senator were not only false and inaccurate, but extremely harmful to the United States' efforts in Southeast Asia and the rest of the

world. Tragically, some veterans, scorned by the antiwar movement and their allies, retreated to a life of despair and suicide. Two of my crew mates were among them. For that there is no forgiveness.

—*Richard O'Mara*

I served in Vietnam as a boat officer from June of 1968 to July of 1969. My service was three months in Coastal Division 13 out of Cat Lo, and nine months with Coastal Division 11 based in An Thoi. John Kerry was in An Thoi the same time I was. I am here today to express the anger I have harbored for over thirty-three years, about being accused with my fellow shipmates of war atrocities.

All I can say is that when I leave here today, I'm going down to the Wall to tell my two crew members it's not true, and that they and the other forty-nine Swiftees who are on the Wall were then and are still now the best.

—*Robert Brant*

We look at Vietnam. After all these years, it is still languishing in isolated poverty and helplessness and tyranny. This is John Kerry's legacy. I deeply resent John Kerry's using his Swift Boat experience, and his betrayal of those who fought there, as a stepping-stone to his political ambitions.

—*Bernard Wolff*

Back to 1971

In the question-and-answer exchange following his prepared statement to the Fulbright Committee, Senator George Aiken of Vermont asked John Kerry what would happen in South Vietnam if America withdrew from the war:

Mr. KERRY: . . . But I think, having done what we have done to that country, we have an obligation to offer sanctuary to the perhaps 2,000, 3,000 people who might face, and obviously they would, we understand that, might face political assassination or something else. But my feeling is that those 3,000 who may have to leave that country—

Senator AIKEN: I think your 3,000 estimate might be a little low because we had to help 800,000 find sanctuary from North Vietnam after the French lost at Dien Bien Phu.

In 1975, when North Vietnam took over the South, a mass exodus began. Those fearing political repression or fearing for their lives desperately sought to leave the country. An estimated 1.5 to 2 million people set out by sea on anything that would float, risking starvation or drowning. Over a quarter of a million were simply lost at sea. Others were murdered, raped, tortured by pirates. The refugees headed for Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. As late as 1997, thousands remained in refugee camps scattered across Asia, awaiting naturalization or, even worse, repatriation. If John Kerry and his anti-war associates were correct, if the Vietnamese comprehended no fundamental difference between freedom and Communism, why did so many risk death?

After their victory, the Communists established a network of nearly one hundred "reeducation camps," political prisons in which they incarcerated indefinitely a wide range of former enemies—officials of the South Vietnamese government; bureaucrats and educators; intellectuals, including writers, reporters, and religious leaders; anyone whom the Vietnamese communists considered dangerous because they had supported or worked with the United States to stop the advance of Communism in Indochina. Estimates of the number of people put through these camps range from half a million to nearly one million.

Subsequent to establishing their hold on South Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communists turned their aggressive armies toward Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, and ethnic minorities were not safe within Vietnam. In the years since 1975, the Vietnamese Communists have waged war on the Montagnards, the Christian mountain people who dared to fight with the United States against Ho Chi Minh.

Yet nowhere in the public record is there any evidence that John Kerry has ever admitted his estimate was wrong—that only three thousand people would have to be relocated to protect them in the event of a communist victory in Vietnam.

Toi Dang, a Vietnamese sailor who served with Kerry and O'Neill in Coastal Division 11 on An Thoi (and in its South Vietnamese successor) from January 1969 until April 1975, remembers the horror of the North Vietnamese takeover. Dang was able to escape to the United States, shorn of his family, heritage, and country. The nineteen people in his unit were all placed in reeducation camps and disappeared forever. His wife's uncle was taken to a camp on the Chinese border where the only allowed tools were bomb fragments. Without food or medicine, almost everyone in the camp soon died. One naval officer from An Thoi was executed for shooing a chicken from his small garden. The Vietnamese sailors of An Thoi—Swift brothers to this day—have a special memory of John Kerry and his testimony. In Dang's words: "His testimony was all lies. He is a brother only to other liars—not to my Swift brothers."¹¹

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