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How the War Shaped the Man

Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War; Douglas Brinkley; William Morrow: 546 pp., \$25.95

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John Kerry enlisted in the Navy four months before graduating from Yale University in 1966. With U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War escalating rapidly, joining voluntarily offered more attractive options to a young college graduate than did waiting to be drafted. After completing officer candidate school, 23-year-old Ensign Kerry was assigned to the guided-missile frigate U.S.S. Gridley, based in Long Beach.

In early February 1968, a day after the Gridley set sail for Southeast Asia, Ensign Kerry requested reassignment as a small-boat commander in Vietnam. "I didn't really want to get involved in the war," Kerry said in 1986 during his first term in the U.S. Senate. "When I signed up for the swift boats, they had very little to do with the war. They were involved in coastal patrolling and that's what I thought I was going to be doing."

Two weeks after that request, Kerry learned that one of his closest Yale friends, Richard Pershing, grandson of Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing, had died in a Viet Cong ambush while serving as a lieutenant in the 101st Airborne. Pershing's death traumatized Kerry. "With the loss of Persh, something has gone out of me," he wrote his parents. "Time will never heal this. It may alleviate -- but it will never heal."

Even 3 1/2 decades later, the four-term Democratic senator from Massachusetts vividly remembers getting the news. "The loss of Persh hit me like a ton of bricks," he told historian Douglas Brinkley in 2003. "The Vietnam War suddenly came into focus like it had never before. It wasn't a distant thing. It wasn't a newsreel or news report or newspaper story. It wasn't at arm's distance that you were able to grapple with -- it was right inside your gut."

Brinkley, a prolific author who has profiled such diverse figures as Dean Acheson, Jimmy Carter, Rosa Parks and Henry Ford, was given 12 hours of reflective interviews with Kerry, plus unrestricted access to his trove of Vietnam-era personal papers and diaries. "Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War" is the informative result, a serious book enriched by additional interviews with more than 100 of Kerry's shipmates, friends and critics. Brinkley emphasizes that Kerry, who was preparing his presidential bid, exerted "no editorial control over this project whatsoever." While some conservative pundits may allege that "Tour of Duty" is simple hagiography by a scholar with hopeful dreams of following Kerry into the White House, Brinkley's portrait of Kerry is more mixed than either the critics or the author himself probably realize.

Kerry's first exposure to Vietnam came when the Gridley, stationed off the Vietnamese coast, made a brief port call at Danang. Kerry reacted like the green rookie he was. "Wherever I went and young Vietnamese men would look at me I grew scared," he wrote his parents. "There really was no way to tell" who was a harmless civilian and who could be an undercover foe.

After the Gridley sailed home, Kerry was reassigned; he returned to South Vietnam in November 1968 to the huge American naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. Initially he had little to do. "I wondered naively where the war was," he told Brinkley. "It seemed dull." He sought a transfer to a more front-line locale.

Brinkley asserts, with no supporting statements from Kerry, that "if he was going to avenge the death of Dick Pershing, he needed to see combat." Kerry "felt inexplicably drawn to combat," writes Brinkley, who portrays Kerry as ambitiously driven since his teenage years.

Such characterizations go significantly beyond Kerry's contemporaneous words. Brinkley describes Kerry as "enlisting in the Navy for a combat assignment," but neither Kerry's 1966 enlistment nor his 1968 reassignment request necessarily represented any desire for combat. Indeed, his appeal for transfer somewhere other than Cam Ranh may well have signified a wish to command a ship rather than a revenge-based desire for physical combat.

All too soon, however, Kerry did see action. One night in early December while on a small-boat mission just north of Cam Ranh, Kerry received a minor shrapnel wound; a few days later he was given command of his own swift boat, PCF-44, for "patrol craft fast," and sent south to An Thoi in the Mekong River delta.

Over the next 10 weeks, Kerry would encounter more intense combat than most Vietnam-era sailors ever saw. The Mekong Delta, Brinkley writes, was "the most impenetrable part of South Vietnam," with "more than four thousand miles of inland 'water roads.'" Kerry's six-man, shallow-draft patrol craft, armed with three heavy-caliber machine guns and a mortar, would sail up various rivers and canals, often in tandem with other swift boats, to seek and destroy suspected Viet Cong encampments.

The U.S. strategy, young sailors quickly learned, was dangerously simple: Because the swift boats with their noisy engines could not sneak up on anyone, Viet Cong ambushers would lie silently in wait on the banks of narrow waterways as the Americans approached. In a journal Kerry kept during all but the most intense weeks of combat, the young officer complained that there was no "rationale for letting the enemy have the first devastating shots at us in the rivers, and without exception they always did."

Kerry, joined by fellow officers, protested the strategy to his commanders, deploring how "we're making men fight in a fashion that defies reason." When the swift boats destroyed a suspected Viet Cong village, it would be rebuilt within days. "It seemed to me to be testimony to the futility of what we were doing," Kerry explained. "People were risking their lives and just not seeing any results for the effort." Kerry's immediate superiors told him there was nothing they could do.

Kerry's combat experiences climaxed in late February and early March 1969. Eight days after suffering a second wound on Feb. 20, Kerry beached his boat in the midst of a Viet Cong ambush. Dashing ashore, the young officer shot and killed at close range an enemy soldier holding a powerful rocket launcher. That act would earn him a Silver Star, the Navy's third-highest combat award. Less than two weeks later, during another ambush of a multi-boat U.S.

task force, Kerry's right arm was injured and a young army lieutenant in a nearby boat was blown overboard. Under enemy fire, Kerry maneuvered his boat toward the soldier, James Rassmann, and pulled him from the water despite his own wound. For that, Kerry would later be awarded the Bronze Star. (It was Rassmann, a registered Republican now retired from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, who joined Kerry on the campaign trail in Iowa to offer his support.)

On March 17, four days after that ambush, Kerry applied for transfer out of Vietnam under a Navy policy that allowed reassignment for anyone who had suffered three wounds. Brinkley does not fully plumb Kerry's reasons for cutting short his combat assignment, but the young officer's intensifying anger at the Navy's costly, futile tactics was unmistakable. "Men were losing any idea of accomplishment when they spent hours in a river being shot at, and then came out to find that they could go back in the next day and that it was just as dangerous and that no territory had been secured," Kerry told Brinkley. "The idea that we were ever going to make these people our friends, when we went through shooting up their homes and cutting off their rivers ... Christ, if they weren't VC before we went in, they were bound to be by the time we got finished."

Two weeks after Kerry left Vietnam, one of his closest fellow swift-boat commanders, Don Droz, was killed in another enemy ambush. "Don's death cut like a knife," Kerry recalled. "It was all so senseless."

Within months after his honorable discharge in early 1970, Kerry became an outspoken member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. "We above all others have earned the right to criticize the war on Southeast Asia," he told attendees at one September rally. When the veterans group organized a mass descent upon Washington in April 1971, Kerry was interviewed on NBC's "Meet the Press." Later he testified for more than two hours before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"I committed the same kinds of atrocities as thousands of other soldiers," the 27-year-old Kerry told television viewers. U.S. attacks upon Vietnamese civilians and the burning of their villages, he said, were "contrary to the laws of warfare" and "contrary to the Geneva Conventions," and "ordered as a matter of written, established policy by the government of the United States from the top down. And I believe that ... the men who ordered us ... are war criminals."

Kerry quit the veterans group later that year, but he could not let go of the war. "It was a question of responsibility, of keeping faith with why I survived, why I was lucky enough to come back -- and others didn't," he told Brinkley. "I took on a deep responsibility on a very personal level of making sure that guys like Dick Pershing and Don Droz didn't die in vain."

In the early 1990s, along with fellow senator and Vietnam veteran John McCain, Kerry took the lead in resolving long-festered questions about U.S. soldiers missing or held prisoner in Southeast Asia and working to normalize U.S. relations with Vietnam. The 14 trips Kerry made to Vietnam during the 1990s represented "the final act in his nearly thirty-year-long tour of duty," Brinkley writes. Once again the biographer may be overreaching, but "Tour of Duty" richly details how wrenchingly transformative an effect the Vietnam War had on the man who could become the next president. *

PHOTO: VIETNAM WAR: John Kerry was wounded three times. PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press