

Image Vs Reality:
Swift Boats Vets Versus The Reality of VVAW
Image Manipulation for Political and Personal Gain

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By

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In 1971, the year that will figure so prominently in today's presentations and discussions, I was 29 years old. I had served in Vietnam for two tours, totaling 21 months. My tours spanned the years 1965 thru 1968. I had been a United States Marine, Sgt. E-5. During my two tours I served as a Combat Engineer Team Leader and as a Helicopter Support Team Leader in multiple combat operations in the field in South Vietnam...specifically in I Corps...the Northernmost Military Region, which bordered the DMZ with North Vietnam. As Combat Engineers and Helicopter Support Teams, we were attached out in four person teams to the various Marine Regiments and Battalions and Companies for support for their combat operations. Therefore, we were assigned to and worked with Marine units of all sizes and from all Divisions; the 1st, 3d, and 5th Marine Divisions who were deployed in RVN at the time. In this capacity, we were exposed to the many fighting philosophies of these units, which were very diversified. In a nutshell; in our capacity, we saw it all.

I had seen enough by 1 March 1969, after a Marine Corps career spanning 10 years. I was decorated for my services in combat, and was Honorably Discharged as a Sgt. E-5 from the United States Marine Corps. Two years later, in 1971, I was married to a beautiful woman, going to Saddleback College, in Mission Viejo, Ca, on the GI Bill (such as it was), surfing, and trying to put my experiences in Vietnam and the Marine Corps and all of the turmoil that thinking about it brought to me out of my mind. I was doing great at college and having a large time leading an almost dreamlike life, why sweat it, right? Then one day, I saw a newspaper article on the inside pages of a newspaper that had a photo of a Marine hunkered down and firing his

M-16 over a berm in a place called Go Noi Island, RVN. I forget the newspaper or the title of the article, or the exact date; but I sure didn't forget the image of that Marine fighting on Go Noi Island. I had been there, two years previously. It all came flashing back to me; in the late summer of 1968; I was attached (USMC calls it TAD) out to successive units rotating on and off Go Noi Island, RVN, without myself having rotated out of the field for several of those unit rotations. Until one day, word came out to us in the field; the 27th Marine Regt, whom I had come over with in 5th Shore Party, from Kanehoe Bay, Hi, was being rotated out of Vietnam, along with the Army's 82d Airborne Division, this withdrawal was scheduled for September of 1968. Now, here it was, two years later; and this Marine in this photo was still engaged with the enemy on Go Noi Island...just as I had been for so many weeks during that final in-country Operation. That was just overwhelming! And then all of the other craziness of it all came roaring back on me...I was instantly reinforced that I had done the right thing in getting out of the Marine Corps, and away from any need to have to ever return to Vietnam...at the time I left, we had already been there for four years, with no end in sight...now, seven years, and counting, later; I was being confronted with the exact same scenario, in the exact same location that I had managed to escape from in 1968, upon the withdrawal of the 27th Marine Regiment from the field of battle in Vietnam. I felt so tremendously sad for that unidentified Marine, and for all those who were still dying needlessly, without rhyme or reason, and then, suddenly; for *all* of us.

I take the time and the space here to give you all of this, in order to set the context of the times, and of my state of mind, and my perceptions of events yet to come. A very different perspective, and a very different truth than those wannabe Plumbers, the *Swift Boat Vets For Truth AKA Vietnam Veterans For A Just Peace, circa 1971* would have you believe existed in that day regarding VVAW and the Vietnam Veterans who stepped up to the plate and testified at the *Winter Soldier Investigation*, in Detroit in 1971, and those who symbolically tossed their medals back to the government that issued them at *Operation Dewey Canyon III*. Both of these 1971 "Actions" were in protest to what was becoming in all clarity, a failed US policy in Vietnam that was supported by an Administration that lied to, and misled the American people about what the reality was regarding our deployment there. All of this is documented by actual American History and other Truths to follow...*i.e.* *The Pentagon Papers*, the Watergate hearings, and last, but not

least; the ultimate fall of the Nixon Administration, under the threat of impeachment and in total disgrace. And in recent times, subsequent to the aforementioned events; the duplicity of Nixon's war criminals in leaving American POWs behind and unaccounted for in South East Asia, at the same time telling the American people that all the POWs were already home.

These are the Truths of the times, not the swill that the Swift Boat Vets are trying to foist off on America as truth. The Swifties are quite simply an ugly and dangerous resurgence of the Nixon Doctrine On The Governing Of The American People. Apparently we didn't get all of the cockroaches when we turned on the lights during the fight for control of America's political system back in the '70s.

In the volatility of those times, it was becoming extremely difficult for many veterans to reconcile their participation in all of that purposeless killing. That and the, seemingly, never ending deaths of the American GIs who followed in their foot steps. The one's who followed were the numbers reported each night by the Networks; "*Only* 10 Americans were killed in Vietnam today" ...*Only* 10!? How do you interpret "*Only*"? This was my first introduction to Right Wing spin on the news. The sad thing is that most of the GIs that went to Vietnam prior to 1971 were unaware of the objective truth. They went armed only with their government's lies about their pending sacrifices. It's one thing to fight and die bravely for something you believe in, but completely another to kill and possibly die for something that nobody other than Nixon's war criminal cabinet and advisors believed in any longer. The lid was coming off the pot, and VVAW was becoming the cook, with a very big spoon for stirring things up. This was the image that I as a veteran of that war saw; not the one that the then Veterans For A Just Peace were trying to conjure up.

In our college and surfing community in Southern California, we had constant updates from student activists, and *PBS* Specials, as well as through our music and the *LA Free Press*; the primary underground news organ of the time. It was on those pages that I first became aware of *Vietnam Veterans Against The War*. At that time they were using the *Free Press* to recruit members and to stir up interest in Vietnam Veterans joining them in Washington D.C. for an action that they were calling *Dewey Canyon III, A Limited Incursion into the Congress of the US* to protest further participation in the Vietnam War by US forces. Shortly after learning of

the *Winter Soldier Investigation* which had recently taken place in Detroit, a documentary film of the event was made available. These guys were testifying publicly to acts that all of us knew were SOP, (Standard Operating Procedure) for the day, throughout the military in Vietnam. However, for the most part, the rest of us had never even talked to our families about these kinds of things, let alone each other. Our shame was so great, and our emotions so numbed from having been a part of all those horrible things that these guys were now telling the American people about; that we had never dared given even a small thought to sharing them with *anyone*. But, here it was...cat out of the bag...more Truth to deal with...these guys were the heroes that gave many of us, through their actions in 1971, an avenue to begin healing from wounds that we didn't even realize that we had up to that point! Furthermore they shocked America awake as to the reality of a Tour Of Duty in Vietnam. They were saying words that my heart wished that I had the courage to say. I was catching on fire!

Dewey Canyon III was all over the news while it was going on, in what was growing coverage of VVAW's actions by all forms of media...TV put the VVAW in all of the living rooms of America at the 6:00 P.M. hour (Before Cable News). This was extremely powerful imagery that was being put in front of Americans who huddled around their TV sets by the millions every night in those days. *GIs throwing their medals away?! How could this be? What are they, a bunch of Communists? They can't really be veterans! There must be a sinister plot of violent overthrow by radical dissidents in all of this.* That was the message the Swifties AKA VVFAJP were reinforcing as far and wide as they were able to back in 1971. Or, was it something more; was something really happening here? Was it possible that these men were *really* tormented heroes pouring out their souls to their countrymen, as it appeared that they were? The American people chose to believe that conclusion...embraced that image, and accepted the Truth of the Reality that these men bore as bravely as they bore their combat wounds and mental scars resulting from their service to their country in Vietnam. VVAW became a household acronym. And so, as a reward for one of the most powerful, heart rendering, and yet peaceful statements ever made protesting our participation in Vietnam; the symbolic returning of medals earned in Vietnam; the Swifties AKA VVFP, attacked us.

However, the American people took us to *their* hearts. This incredibly powerful imagery was calculated to do just what it did; stop the hearts of Americans as they watched Operation Dewey Canyon III unfold on TV, and while men with tears in their eyes and cries of frustration on their lips symbolically tossed their awards for service and heroism back to the government, and made all those watching the evening news believers. For their part, the then version of what is now slickly named *The Swift Boat Veterans For Truth AKA Vietnam Veterans For A Just Peace*, heaped derision, disrespect and lies about these men's service to their country, and on their actions protesting further service by anybody on that failed mission. I know first-hand about the true character of the *Winter Soldier Investigation* vets, and of their claims, and that of hundreds of other vets who were there on the Mall in 1971 for *Dewey Canyon III*, and the real nature of their service to their country. I know this as I was to meet and come to know most of them personally over the next few years as I traveled the US on *VVAW* business...and I assure you that it was Courageous and Honorable service. These *VVAW* types were dedicated to bringing about the 11 Objectives of *VVAW*, not assassination plots and anti-government conspiracies, as the Swifts' AKA *VVFAJP* propaganda would have you believe. The forces of evil, in this case, known under the modern day guise of *Swift Boat Veterans For Truth*, on the other hand, attempted and still to this day attempt, to portray the symbolic *Dewey Canyon III* medal return action as a contrived left wing political plot to overthrow the legitimate government by a bunch of non-combat veterans and wannabes. **Wrong!** The majority of the news watchers among the American people of the day rightly figured it out that; if the vets who had fought and managed to return from this war were there in Washington, D.C. for this, and are making this kind of statement in front of the world, there *must* be something to it.

It was unprecedented that American fighting men would return from a war and speak out so passionately and poignantly against America's continued participation in that same war. It is still some of the most powerful and defining imagery in American history. The Swifts, on the other hand, in 1971, were basically unknown to the majority of the masses, and remained that way right up to the recent Presidential election, when they reared their ugly heads and showed their black hearts. Other than one subsequent debate where there "leader", then and now; John O'Neill was humiliated by John Kerry, and drowned in his own rhetoric on ABC's special June 30, 1971

broadcast of *The Dick Cavett Show*, they generated very little public interest in their Nixononian like postulations. They were not heard from in any kind of a meaningful way again until the recent Presidential election, where they once again fired up the hate machine, and again took up their assault on *VVAW* and John Kerry. They even had a new and timely name; *The Swift Boat Veterans For Truth*. The right wing money poured into their coffers, and they launched their campaign to sabotage the Presidential campaign of past *VVAW* leader and spokesman, Senator John Kerry.

They had curried favor with the Money Minions of the Right with their pathetic attempts in back in 1971 to derail the *VVAW* onslaught of those times; and the 2004 election was pay-off time for them. They were given millions in financing, as well as free political license to perform character assassination on the Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry. The saddest part, this time around, was that John Kerry gave them a bye. Americans scratched their heads and wondered why he didn't respond; *Could the Swift Boat vets be right* they wondered, as Kerry failed to respond? *Could these charges be true; why doesn't he speak up?* This 1 billion decibel silence on the matter by the Kerry camp empowered the Swifties, and fattened their war chest. And, most importantly today; it is the reason that this panel appears before you...*it stops here*; these thugs will not intimidate us, and they will not be allowed to dishonor *our* service, *our* politics or *our* heroes, ever again. Not without direct response from those who know, and have lived the Truth that these guys so badly distort for personal political and financial gain...today is the beginning of the end for these thugs and their Brown Shirt tactics.

John Kerry gained national prominence at *Dewey Canyon III*, when his countenance appeared on *PBS* TV at the Congressional hearings where he made the famous "*Last Man To Die Speech*". John was not speaking for himself, as the Swifties would have you believe. He was speaking as the selected representative of the thousands of *VVAW* Veterans who had descended on Washington D.C. for *Dewey Canyon III*, and said so right at the opening of his presentation... So, that was the *VVAW* Reality of the time, not the image that the *Vietnam Veterans For A Just Peace* AKA *Swift Boat Veterans For Truth* were trying to conjure up for their personal and political gain. That was the Reality of *VVAW* in 1971; not the lies and half truths of the politically opportunistic *Vietnam Veterans For A Just Peace*,

who are once again wheeling out the old act, directed now at AARP; our parents and Grandparents...and it was a very powerful Reality, indeed. It was a compelling reality that was fueled with the fires of the souls of thousands of America's best. *Winter Soldier Investigation, Operation Dewy Canyon III*, and John Kerry's soul wrenching speech in Congress was the *VVAW* that thousands of us Vietnam Veterans saw and knew in 1971...the call that we answered. That Reality was the reality that America in general saw and knew to be *VVAW*. It was *that* reality that they responded to in their enthusiastic support of our always non-violent actions. Not the sordid and seedy surreal dime store novel image of wild and dangerous men plotting, and trying to hatch schemes of violent overthrow of our government, and assassination of our elected officials that the Swifts would have America believe to be the case. *That* reality was perceived and acted on by the majority of the real combat veterans of *VVAW* as a patriotic undertaking. Many forces tried to co-opt our image, and our military organizational skills, and what we perceived as our national mandate...we were infiltrated by the FBI and the communists, and both were very challenging to our efforts; but, like the good combat soldiers that we were; through it all, we never lost site of the objective, and we never faltered till we recaptured the American Flag from the Nixon administration, and brought America's interest in involvement in a continuing war in Vietnam to an end.

Many of us will be paying the price, and bearing the personal scars for that commitment for the remainder of our lives; but it was a good thing...not the swill that the *Swift Boat Vets* spew in the form of snippets and half truths, self righteously assassinating people's character and belittling their service to their country...damning them for exercising the basic American rights of freedom of thought, and freedom of speech. Values that they had shed blood for...theirs, and that of the enemy forces in the field in Vietnam.

Every time I get an image of the *VVAW* that I knew and participated in; my heart swells with the pride of having been a part of their Reality. On the other hand, speaking of images and reality; every time I think of the Swifties, I get images of Nixon and Jack-Boots. *Beware, America*; think for yourselves; don't allow the forces of evil do your thinking and analysis of events for you. We fought and died in Vietnam, and later struggled to bring down a corrupt and evil Administration in order that you should be able vote your heart and your conscious, not the party line. That is the Reality of

VVAWs The Swift Boats For Truth, and their pathetic and cruel manipulation thereof for personal and political gain. Truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, *and* in the hearts of those who have lived it.