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Late Edition - Final**SECTION:** Section A; Column 1; National Desk; Pg. 1; THE 2004 CAMPAIGN: THE MASSACHUSETTS SENATOR**LENGTH:** 2724 words**HEADLINE:** Kerry Role in Antiwar Veterans Is Delicate Issue in His Campaign**BYLINE:** By DAVID M. HALBFINGER**BODY:**

When questions were raised last month about whether a 27-year-old John Kerry had attended a Kansas City meeting of Vietnam Veterans Against the War where the assassination of senators was discussed, the Kerry presidential campaign went into action.

It accepted the resignation of a campaign volunteer in Florida, Scott Camil, the member of the antiwar group who raised the idea in November 1971 of killing politicians who backed the war. The campaign pressed other veterans who were in Kansas City, Mo., 33 years ago to re-examine their hazy memories while assuring them that Mr. Kerry was sure he had not been there.

John Musgrave, a disabled ex-marine from Baldwin City, Kan., who told The Kansas City Star that Mr. Kerry was at the meeting, said he got a call from John Hurley, the Kerry campaign's veterans coordinator.

"He said, 'I'd like you to refresh your memory,'" Mr. Musgrave, 55, recounted in an interview, confirming an account he had given to The New York Sun. "He said it twice. 'And call that reporter back and say you were mistaken about John Kerry being there.'"

Such little-noticed moments in Mr. Kerry's past — including his decision at age 26 to meet the Vietcong emissaries to the Paris peace talks — are coming under new scrutiny now, as Mr. Kerry finally makes the presidential run that his comrades in arms, and in the antiwar movement, half-mockingly predicted decades ago.

In an interview about his antiwar activities, Mr. Kerry said that he knew nothing of attempts by his campaign to tinker with the past and that he disapproved. "People's memories are people's memories," he said, adding that he had no memory of the Kansas City meeting.

Mr. Hurley says he was merely asking Mr. Musgrave to be accurate, "because his memory was contrary to everything I was hearing."

Yet while Mr. Kerry is heavily accentuating his five months in combat in Vietnam, he rarely emphasizes his two years working against the war — though he first catapulted to fame 33 years ago this week when he electrified millions of viewers in asking the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "How do you ask a man to be last man to die for a mistake?"

And when Mr. Kerry appeared on "Meet the Press" last weekend, he disavowed his own remarks on the same program in April 1971, when he said he and thousands of other soldiers had committed "atrocities."

From its inception, Vietnam Veterans Against the War was a curiosity and an influential force in the Vietnam protest movement because of the novelty, and political potency, of antiwar demonstrators in uniform.

In the year and a half that Mr. Kerry belonged to the group, it was loosely structured and had its share of revolutionaries and provocateurs — including many secretly working for law enforcement — who pushed the writings of Chairman Mao and talked of tossing grenades, though they seldom did worse than toss bags of chicken droppings at the Pentagon.

The clean-shaven, shorter-haired, neatly dressed Mr. Kerry, dozens of veterans recalled in interviews, had little

patience for any of that. He was almost always the most conservative man in the room.

"He was working in the system, and he wanted to stay in the system," said Al Hubbard, now 68 and ailing, who was one of the group's leaders and said it was the first time he had spoken to a reporter in more than 30 years. "He had his own personal agenda. I think he was just kind of doing dress rehearsals for public office."

To this day, Vietnam Veterans Against the War remains controversial to some veterans who viewed its dissent as harmful to the troops overseas. The cultural and generational divide, after all, did seem to cross right through the veterans' group. Among the many polarizing images of the period was a photograph of long-haired ex-soldiers simulating the Iwo Jima memorial, but with a flag held upside-down to signal distress; the picture graced the cover of a book that had Mr. Kerry as a co-author.

Fledgling War Critic

Mr. Kerry started his antiwar activities in the spring of 1969, when he was just back from Vietnam and working as an admiral's aide in Brooklyn. The death of another close friend in the war that April, he recalled in an interview, "sort of galvanized my feelings that I can't wait around — I've got to get out there and do something."

That fall, his sister Peggy, a volunteer for the Vietnam Moratorium Committee, offered that Mr. Kerry, an amateur pilot, fly Adam Walinsky, a former speechwriter for Robert F. Kennedy, to a series of antiwar rallies. On Oct. 15, the off-duty lieutenant shuttled Mr. Walinsky across New York state and pumped him for information.

The Navy man had one thing on his mind: politics. "He asked a lot of questions about Robert Kennedy, about the '68 campaign, what it had been about," Mr. Walinsky said. "The questions really were: 'How does politics work? How do you get something done? How do you mobilize people?'"

A few months later, Mr. Kerry, freshly out of the service, ran in an antiwar caucus in Concord, Mass., that was convened to pick a primary challenger to a hawkish incumbent congressman. Liberals had already coalesced around the Rev. Robert F. Drinan, a war critic, but Mr. Kerry fared surprisingly well before bowing out and becoming chairman of the successful Drinan campaign. The run drew attention to Mr. Kerry and in May he was invited to speak against the war on "The Dick Cavett Show."

Two weeks later, he married Julia Thorne, and on a trip to Europe with his new bride, Mr. Kerry, the 26-year-old ex-lieutenant took a taxicab from Paris to a suburban villa. The son of a diplomat, Mr. Kerry had managed to arrange a private meeting with North Vietnamese and Vietcong emissaries to the peace talks.

He says he does not remember who else was in the room except for Nguyen Thi Binh, the Vietcong spokeswoman in Paris, who was then bedeviling the Nixon administration by issuing peace proposals it considered little more than propaganda.

"It's not a big deal," he says now. "People were dropping in. It was a regular sort of deal." Senator Eugene J. McCarthy had visited Paris months earlier, and other officials often sat in with the Vietnamese and held news conferences afterward.

Mr. Kerry said he considered it a fact-finding mission. The talks had been stalemated for months. Still on the table was a year-old Vietcong initiative that included an offer to release American prisoners of war when American forces pulled out.

Mr. Kerry recalled "testing what I thought the lay of the land was" in the meeting. "Not that you take their word for their word, but because you sort of put the pieces of the puzzle together."

Asked why the Vietnamese would meet with a 26-year-old, Mr. Kerry suggested it was because he had been on television as a veteran opposed to the war. He acknowledged that they might have been trying to use him to shape American public opinion.

"I knew that, and I was trying to be careful about what was real and what wasn't real," he said. "I wanted to really probe. I wanted to look them in the eyes, and say, 'Well, what happens if this happens? And what does this mean?'"

Mr. Kerry came home, and before a Senate hearing 10 months later he criticized President Nixon for not accepting Mrs. Binh's assurances that the Vietnamese would release American prisoners of war if U.S. troops simply left.

Group Finds A Leader

It was sometime in the summer of 1970 that Mr. Kerry was contacted by Vietnam Veterans Against the War. A member had seen him on television, and the group needed a speaker for a Labor Day rally.

The rally capped an 86-mile march from Morristown, N.J., to Valley Forge, Pa., two Revolutionary War sites, by a ragtag army of latter-day veterans. Mr. Kerry spoke after Jane Fonda and others, and he sounded a theme he would continue to refine, according to Douglas Brinkley's "Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War" (William Morrow, 2004): "We are here to say that it is not patriotism to ask Americans to die for a mistake."

He was a hit, by most accounts, although some say Mr. Kerry was bested by a handful of amputees from a nearby Army hospital who clambered aboard a pickup and brought the audience to tears.

Mr. Kerry, for his part, came away with a mixed impression: "I thought there was an authenticity and a level of pain and hurt and anger that was powerful, palpable, that really was very moving," but that their message was not yet ready to take to a wider audience, he says. "Some people would have had a hard time relating."

First Lt. William L. Calley Jr. was on trial in late 1970, and members of V.V.A.W. wanted to get out the word that, as Mr. Kerry would soon argue, the whole nation was really to blame for the My Lai massacre and was "scapegoating one man." Hoping to prove that American policy had given rise to widespread war crimes, the group arranged a gathering in Detroit where veterans could testify about what they had seen and done.

There had been similar sessions before, and some participants had turned out to be frauds. This time, veterans were required to bring their discharge papers.

Mr. Kerry heard men tell of torture, gang rape and the killing and mutilation of women and children. "It was jarring," Mr. Kerry says. "We'd all heard the stories — just scuttlebutt. But not firsthand."

The weekend was a bust, however, in what the veterans felt mattered most: publicity. "We just thought it was going to be an enormous event and turn everything upside down," says Bill Crandell, an ex-Army officer.

In a group discussion afterward, Mr. Kerry asserted himself for the first time. "John Kerry got up and said, 'I have a suggestion that we take all of this that we want to convey in a march on Washington,' " said Jan Barry, who founded the veterans' group. "And on his feet, he convinced this group of angry people to put their anger into a creative direction."

The news media and Congress would not be able to ignore a demonstration in the capital, Mr. Kerry argued. He worked nonstop to promote the April 1971 demonstration, called Dewey Canyon III after military operations in Laos. He spent much of his time raising money, giving a kind of stump speech at house parties and meeting with wealthy donors.

"He would have one foot in the V.V.A.W. office, and the other in Wall Street," says George Butler, a longtime friend of Mr. Kerry who is now working on a feature-length film about him.

Show of Force

Dewey Canyon III, 33 years ago, was a whirlwind for Mr. Kerry and his fellow angry veterans, beginning when he and Mr. Hubbard, an Air Force veteran and V.V.A.W. leader, appeared on "Meet the Press." Protesters remember Mr. Kerry that week debating how they should return their medals, arguing unsuccessfully that they should not violate a Supreme Court order that they not sleep on the Mall and intervening to prevent veterans from being arrested when they did a can-can on the Supreme Court steps.

To many veterans, the emotional high point was on Friday, April 23, 1971, when they threw away their hard-won medals. Mr. Kerry would later be harshly criticized for discarding only his ribbons but keeping his medals, while actually throwing away the medals of two other men.

To many others, the high point was Mr. Kerry's testimony. "It legitimized us in the eyes of people who saw us as a bunch of dope-smoking hippies," Lenny Rotman of Boston said. "They didn't see John that way. Even my mother was saying, 'If you stick with John Kerry, there'll be opportunities for you.'"

Mr. Kerry's fame was instant. Morley Safer profiled him on "60 Minutes." The publisher of a book about the veterans by Mr. Butler and David Thorne, another friend and veteran, suddenly insisted that Mr. Kerry be listed as an author. Offers came in for his own television program and for a record album.

The antiwar movement's new star was also coming under attack from the Nixon administration. The White House helped arrange for a pro-war Navy veteran to challenge Mr. Kerry to a debate. And F.B.I. files recently brought to light by

Gerald Nicosia, an author who has chronicled the Vietnam veterans' movement, showed that the bureau closely monitored Mr. Kerry.

Fissures Among Protesters

Mr. Kerry was facing down another challenge, meanwhile, from within V.V.A.W.

Meeting in St. Louis in June 1971, the veterans debated what to do next. Some pushed in vain for a bigger march on Washington modeled after the 1932 Bonus Army. The increasingly militant Mr. Hubbard, several recall, proposed a new target, racism. He wanted to organize a convoy of supplies to Cairo, Ill., where armed whites were terrorizing black residents, who were at times retaliating with gunshots. Mr. Kerry said no. It would do nothing to advance the veterans' goal of ending the war, he said. And he refused to support anyone engaged in violence. "He just wanted to stay narrowly focused on Vietnam, and not let any fringe groups participate in things with us," said Mr. Hubbard.

Mr. Kerry's fame, wealth and rank were all making him a lightning rod. Several men accused him of hogging the limelight. "There was a great deal of resentment about that," said Michael McCusker of Portland, Ore. "I felt some of it. Suddenly, he's the one speaking for us, and we didn't choose him necessarily."

Mr. Kerry fended off the challenge and continued to raise money for the group — as much as 40 percent of its income, by one estimate — while also earning thousands of dollars on the lecture circuit. But he says he had emotionally checked out of V.V.A.W. after St. Louis and until recently said he had left the organization at that point.

But several news organizations, including The Kansas City Star and The New York Sun, have recently reported that Mr. Kerry also attended the meeting of the group in Kansas City, Mo., in late 1971 where killing opponents of the war was discussed.

Mr. Kerry says he still has no memory of being there but does not dispute the F.B.I. files. They describe the November meeting as tempestuous, with a showdown between Mr. Kerry and Mr. Hubbard, who it turned out had lied about his rank, claiming to have been an Air Force captain when he had been a sergeant. His actual service in Vietnam was also called into serious question.

Participants said the meeting was also where Mr. Camil, an ex-marine from Florida, proposed killing American politicians who continued to support the war.

Terry DuBose, a Texan, says Mr. Camil and a few other men approached him to participate. "They wanted me to shoot John Tower," he says. "They had a list of six or eight senators who had continuously voted for the war."

Mr. DuBose says he just walked away. But Mr. Musgrave said Mr. Camil brought the idea up for a vote on the meeting's fourth day, a Monday. "It went over like a lead balloon," he says.

Messrs. Musgrave, DuBose, Camil and others who recall the discussion all say they do not recall Mr. Kerry's being present at the vote. Mr. Musgrave says he believes Mr. Kerry, having tendered his resignation, had left a day before. But Mr. Musgrave also says informal discussions of Mr. Camil's deadly idea had gone on all weekend, and "I don't think that there was anybody there that didn't hear about it."

Mr. Hubbard, hobbling from ancient back injuries around his home in a New Mexico trailer park, says his memory "draws a lot of blanks" and cannot even recall a spat with Mr. Kerry. And while the F.B.I. documents included minutes of the meeting prepared by Mike Oliver, a veteran from San Francisco, Mr. Oliver now insists they are a fabrication and swears he was never there.

"After 30 years, we're using F.B.I. files as if they're the Bible," he says. "That's weird, man, let me tell you."

Still, the campaign has tried to contain damage. One veteran, Randy Barnes, said he had questioned his own recollection after speaking to the campaign. And Mr. Musgrave, the ex-marine who told reporters that Mr. Kerry had been at the Kansas City meeting, said he remains livid about being questioned even though Mr. Hurley of the Kerry campaign later apologized to him and said he had not been trying to browbeat his fellow veteran. "I felt like Mr. Kerry, who I've admired all these years, was trying to make me look like I was lying," he said. "And I don't take kindly to that."

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GRAPHIC: Photos: Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee 33 years ago, John Kerry criticized the war, saying, "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" (Photo by Associated Press)

John Kerry was applauded by members of his Vietnam crew and congratulated by Woody Williams, a World War II veteran, at a March 16 event in West Virginia. (Photo by Jim Wilson/The New York Times)

Lt. j.g. John Kerry, with members of his crew on the Mekong Delta in this 1969 photo from his collection, earned honors for his five months of combat in Vietnam. (pg. A12)

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