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"jeff barnard" and "jim rassman" and "one kerry supporter owes life"

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January 24, 2004 Saturday

SECTION: NATIONAL POLITICAL NEWS**LENGTH:** 890 words**HEADLINE:** One Kerry Supporter Owes Life to Candidate**BYLINE:** JEFF BARNARD; Associated Press Writer**DATELINE:** FLORENCE, Ore.**BODY:**

Jim Rassmann was swimming in a muddy brown river in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, ducking bullets from the Viet Cong shooting at him from both banks when John Kerry turned his group of patrol boats around and came to the rescue.

"You know what a mad minute is?" asked Rassmann, who expected to be killed even if he made it to shore and was captured.

He was a 21-year-old U.S. Army Special Forces lieutenant that day nearly 35 years ago on the Bay Hap River that earned Kerry the bronze star. "A mad minute is when you fire everything you've got steadily for a minute. They do it in the military for demonstration purposes. That's what it was like."

The coxswain of Kerry's 60-foot patrol boat eased up to Rassmann, who pulled himself up a net hanging over the bow, but couldn't make it onto the deck. Kerry, his arm wounded in the explosion that blew Rassmann off the boat, ran to the bow and pulled him aboard.

Rassmann was so impressed by Kerry in the March 13, 1969 rescue, he nominated Kerry for the silver star, and was disappointed when the Navy awarded the bronze star with a V for valor.

Now, Rassmann is changing his registration to Democrat so he can vote for Kerry in the Oregon primary and joining the Democratic senator from Massachusetts in his campaign for president in New Hampshire.

"Newt Gingrich disparagingly called people like me the Volvo Republicans - we are fiscal conservatives and social liberals," said Rassmann, a retired Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department lieutenant with a passion for orchids. "This political thing is just for John, and the fact that I think he would be the best president.

"If he had done a lousy job in the Senate and I thought his ideas were ridiculous, I wouldn't have called him. I might have bought him dinner, but I wouldn't have called him," he said.

Rassmann called Kerry's headquarters last week from his home on the Oregon Coast after reading an account of the rescue in "Tour of Duty" by Douglas Brinkley. Rassmann had been visiting his mother in Glendale, Calif., when he went to a book store to buy a CD of operatic arias transcribed for violin. At the cash register, he saw a stack of books with Kerry's picture.

"I opened it to the darned page," describing the rescue, said the 56-year-old Rassmann. "I nearly started crying in the store. I showed it to my wife. I couldn't believe it. We both shook our heads."

Based on Kerry's recollections, "Tour of Duty" Rassmann was on another boat. But Rassmann recalls sitting in the

hatchway of Kerry's pilothouse, returning from a patrol with ethnic Chinese mercenaries, when a mine blew up under one of the other boats and the riverbanks erupted in gunfire. The medal citation is not clear.

"It was a long time ago," Rassmann said of the discrepancy.

Rassmann recalls sidling along the deck next to the pilot house, a rifle in each hand, intending to give one to the bow gunner, when a second mine detonated, launching him into the water. Weighed down by guns, grenades, and ammunition, he sank to the bottom until the five boats passed overhead, then shed his gear and surfaced.

"That's when the VC started shooting at me," he said. "I was closest to the north bank. I decided that was the way to go. But I remember thinking it really didn't matter, because they were shooting at us from both banks. If I couldn't evade them or didn't get rescued, I figured I would get killed if I got captured, because that's what they almost always did to people in my unit."

Rassmann put the book back on the counter and returned home to Oregon. A few days later he was reading newspapers online when, on a whim, he called Kerry's campaign. He told them Kerry had saved his life in Vietnam and he wanted to help.

Kerry's veterans affairs coordinator called back and the next morning Rassmann was on a plane for Des Moines, Iowa, where he was reunited with Kerry and began telling the story of the rescue.

"I have never done anything like this in my life," said Rassmann. "I certainly did not anticipate this leading to what it led to."

Thursday he was awakened at 2:30 a.m. by a "Today Show" crew for a live interview with Katie Couric. There have been calls from the American Orchid Society - Rassmann is chairman of the judging committee - from Special Forces vets and complete strangers.

Rassmann was overwhelmed by the response to his rescue story at one stop in Iowa.

"When we were done and leaving, people would come up and want to shake your hand and say, "Thank you for your service," said Rassmann, his voice choking with emotion. "And that never happened before."

Rassmann was disillusioned with the war when he came home in 1969, but not enough to follow Kerry into Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Finishing college and joining the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, he watched Kerry's career. When Kerry was elected to the Senate, Rassmann sent a letter offering to buy dinner if he was ever in Los Angeles.

"I figure I owe you," Rassmann wrote.

When they reminisced over the few weeks they spent together in Vietnam, Kerry told Rassmann he never saw the letter.

Wherever the campaign leads, Rassmann said his life returns to normal Feb. 3, when he flies to Equador to judge the Latin American Orchid Show.

"I'll be back into flowers," said Rassmann. "I've been neglecting my greenhouse."

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