

Is Winter Soldier 2008 Another Snow Job?

by Terry L. Garlock

I'll admit for starters I did not attend the gathering last week in Silver Springs, MD titled *Winter Soldier: Iraq & Afghanistan – Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations*. This was an event for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts to rail against the war and testify to American racism and atrocities. I don't even know what happened at those meetings but I will raise a warning flag nonetheless.

I hope you think instead of letting yourself *feel* when you hear news reports from Winter Soldier 2008, and study what really happened at the first Winter Soldier event in Detroit in 1971. I've always wondered if Detroit was chosen for its proximity to Canada where many draft-dodgers fled, but I don't know.

That gathering in early 1971, funded by Jane Fonda and organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), was planned as a forum for anti-war veterans to speak out against the war. It sounds so credible on the surface, actual veterans of a war taking a stand against it. The problem was VVAW was a group of radicals, just a tiny percentage of Vietnam Veterans, deperate enough in their anti-war zeal that they voted in a November 1971 Kansas City meeting whether to undertake assassinations of southern US Senators who supported the war, specifically Sen. John Tower (R-TX), Sen. John Stennis (D-MS), and Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-SC). John Kerry was one of the VVAW officers who voted "no" and the motion to assassinate these senators was defeated.

But what about the 1971 Winter Soldier testimony? One after another, men told stories of rape, murder and other atrocities in Vietnam. Some of their testimony was filmed.

Shortly thereafter, In April 1971 John Kerry, VVAW officer and leader at Winter Soldier, appeared before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Senator Fulbright, who was desperately searching for leverage to end the Vietnam war. Kerry told the Senate Committee some fantastic lies, and his words took the nation by storm: ". . . 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. 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 Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam . . ."

Kerry went on to tell the Committee that the South Vietnamese people didn't care whether they lived under democracy or Communism, that America was "more guilty than any other body" of violations of Geneva Conventions, that America had created a 'generation of monsters' in its own troops and that he was ashamed of his service in Vietnam.

We who served in Vietnam in combat know what Kerry said was preposterous, a pack of egregious lies engineered to further an anti-war agenda. But the news media, and the American public, weary of the war and primed to believe the worst, lapped it up like starved puppies without realizing they had devoured a masterful piece of political theater.

What about all that testimony? Ordered by the Senators on the Foreign Relations Committee, US Army Criminal Investigations Division and the US Navy investigated to identify and follow up on atrocity claims, as did independent reporters. All but one case was closed as unsubstantiated, demonstrably untrue, or for lack of evidence. Just as interesting to me, and perhaps feeding my curiosity about proximity to Canada, many of those who testified at Winter Soldier were found to have never been in combat, or never been to Vietnam or never even been in the military. Some real Vietnam veterans discovered their name had been used by an imposter.

Maybe some of the atrocity stories had grains of truth; bad things happen in every war where passions run hot.

But the whole of Winter Soldier was a fraud.

What's worse, John Kerry, who launched his political career with his testimony, knew these outlandish tales were a pack of lies.

Steve Pitkin, who now lives in Ft. Lauderdale, stood before a crowd of Vietnam veterans in 2004 and, while his hands were shaking with his inner turmoil, he asked them to forgive him because he lied about atrocities at Winter Soldier in 1971. Pitkin was new to VVAW and had not figured out the radical organization it was. John Kerry recruited Pitkin to go to Winter Soldier ". . . because you're one of the few with combat experience, man . . ." and they rode together from Baltimore in a van. On the ride Kerry pressed him to testify to atrocities in Vietnam while Pitkin told him several times, "But I didn't see any atrocities in Vietnam!"

When they arrived, Kerry and several others pressed Pitkin further with arguments, "Don't you want to help end the war, man?" and "It's a long walk back to Baltimore!" Pitkin caved and agreed to testify. He tells how Kerry took him aside to coach him on what to say about rape, indiscriminate artillery fire on civilians, etc. Then Pitkin took his turn before the cameras to tell his "story."

This is just one small part of how myth became history of the Vietnam War, how the truth was lost. That's a shame because the truth is not all that pretty and America could learn from it if we took the political blinders off. That war started with the noble purpose of stopping the spread of Communism and became screwed up to a fair-thee-well. We had insane rules of engagement that tied the hands of US troops, borders we could not cross to chase an enemy whose sanctuary and supply line was across the border, bombing targets selected in the White House with a goal of not being provocative, the Pentagon rotated officers too quickly so they could get their combat experience ticket punched, and so on.

But American troops were not the bad guys in Vietnam.

The truth is your fathers, husbands, uncles and sons fought in Vietnam with

honor, skill and courage, they won every significant battle against a very tough enemy, and the US Congress gave away the war after it had been micromanaged into a mess. The one group of people who deserved the nation's gratitude were smeared by John Kerry and his anti-war zealots. America bought it hook, line and sinker.

In 2004 during the presidential campaign, a group of Vietnam POWs and Swift Boat crews tried to tell this story, but were always drowned out by the claims they were playing politics. Some day when heads are cool, America will look back and recognize these were a most honorable group of men who gave a "full measure" of service to their country. They deserved to be listened to with care but were dismissed as political hacks. For now, the starving puppies in the American public are lapping up how "swiftboating" is a pejorative term.

When the reports come out from Winter Soldier 2008, when you hear claims from Iraq Veterans Against the War of the terrible things American troops are doing, I hope you get past the feelings those reports will deliver to you, put on your thinking cap, be skeptical and maybe read some quality newspapers over time trying to separate truth from fiction, fact from political theater.

It is possible this time reporters without an agenda, neither pro-war nor anti-war, will do their best to deliver a true account of the events and what they mean. Maybe this time America will give the benefit of the doubt to their own sons and daughters in uniform. But somehow I doubt it.

Terry Garlock was a Cobra gunship helicopter pilot in the Vietnam War.
tgarlock@mindspring.com