

**John Murtha:
Hero,
Military genius,
~ or ~
Legend in his own mind?**

This missive is “penned, scribbled, or transcribed, via keyboard” in response to Larry Keen’s posting to Bob Rohrer’s comments on our “state of the nation” and the comments of a supposed “Marine Hero” named “Colonel John Murtha”...

Bob’s website, and accumulation of well done commentaries, provide a patriotic forum of sorts (with a definite “Marine-esque” slant) allowing a platform similar to “*Speaker’s Corner*” in Hyde Park in London. If kept reasonably clean (in terms of commentary), and readable, we have been allowed to add our two “hollahas” (a fractional Saudi coin of small value) worth for comment by others – all in all, a very valuable and pleasant place to come, visit, and throw in a few “hollahas” of our own.

I have to be very careful here, as those who know me, know that I have an opinion on almost any subject, and will add my two hollahas-worth at the drop of a “*urine-slicer*” and drop the “*urine-slicer*” myself!

In this case I will attempt to comment on Congressman Murtha’s *extreme military expertise* giving him some sort of mythical ability to call the shots (a left-handed pun in this case) in a war he has not physically/personally experienced except as a “political observer” well herded about by a (carefully selected) guided entourage. – this does NOT an expert make in my opinion.

Please understand, I have known Larry Keen for more years than I care to admit, starting in 2nd Recon back in 1965. As I recall, our first introduction had to do with a missing “Ahkio” sled (complete with gear including a survival rifle) that came up missing from an Air Force C-130 that had been hauling a Marine Corps recon contingent to various, little known corners of the globe.

We, of course, denied that Larry had any sort of a hand in unauthorized “kumshawing” of such gear, and attested to his obvious innocence, although some of the Marine Corps legal investigative types were scratching their heads in obvious disbelief. Larry was perhaps one of the most talented of kumshaw artists in the entire Corps! He also however, was one tough hombre, as when assigned to the recon school in San Diego (working for another bandit and long time friend, Skip Hartnett) was quite unauthorizedly making scuba dives with a

(more or less) waterproofed full length leg cast, the result of taking a .50 caliber round in the lower extremities in RVN. Larry is one TOUGH hombre, and a gent to ride the river with! It is with these provisos that I base my personal observations on John Murtha, and Larry's comments...

First, John Murtha may indeed be a fine Marine, and deserve the fawning both the right and left of the political spectrum are giving him... **Maybe...**

I my personal observations however, are based on the following:

- 1) Three and a half years stationed in the 8th Marine Corps District Headquarters in New Orleans assigned to the Reserve Branch, during which time I was in a position to observe the machinations that took place in the promotions awarded/assigned to the higher ranking members of the local (and politically well connected) members of the reserve contingent in the States of Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Arkansas.
- 2) Personal observations of the awards assigned to, and received in Vietnam and the methodology occasionally applied to various "round robins" put together as an "ad-hoc" group for career enhancement. Please understand, this was NOT universal, but it did happen much more frequently than it should have, and forever skewed the awards system in my personal mind. The kids (enlisted folks) were essentially/usually innocent of such shenanigans, but were occasionally roped in (by a couple of officers needing corroborating witnesses) to make some of the officer's awards appear to be more believable for the "Career Planners" and to preclude the kids from blowing the whistle on some of the more blatant abuses.

In short, Larry's observation(s) about "end of tour awards" had/has more validity than it should have. While much of the "get kissed on both cheeks" routine encompassed young Captains/Majors/Lt.Cols., some of the same "let's take care of our old buddies" round-robin was also applied to senior enlisted folks, although mercifully not to the same extent.

In pure disgust after reading Kerry's accounts of his daring-do during his "Swift Boat" activities, I wrote an article/sea-story during the preparations for the elections last October/November called *Stolen Valor* (stealing someone else's title at the same time), giving specific examples of John Kerry's pure hokum in "allowing" himself to be decorated in personal preparation for his "upcoming Political Career"... The entire round-robin treatment of "self-awarded" medals

left me with a rather bad taste in my mouth and eventually led me to telling the Commanding General of the Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune to “insert a proffered dangler” in a place not often illuminated by sunshine. Strangely enough, the General and I ultimately became good friends over the incident, but the entire evolution gave my CO at the Range (a true REMF), a case of ulcers. Believe me, those of us on the low end of the totem pole were not the only ones who noticed the disparity in the awards system. The Commanding General, (MGen. Joe Butcher) later retired and became the President of a College in the Mid West – a true gentleman, and one who got my head on straight following a frustrating (if somewhat thrilling and adrenaline producing) war.

ON TO THE END OF TOUR AWARDS:

John Murtha? Until he started interjecting himself into the current equation, I had never heard of this clown. Is he a hero of great renown or a legend in his own mind? I was wondering how I had missed a gent who professes to be a decorated Marine with 37-years service? This would have to be one hell of an old timer! The light didn't dawn until the descriptive adjective of “*Reserve*” came to light! Hummm...Things began to spring into focus. During my tour in the Reserve Branch at the 8th Marine Corps District Headquarters (this was post Korea, but essentially pre-Vietnam), we often kept a number of old timers on the active rolls even though they were well over age, and out of touch with the world situation *IF* (and herein lies the key) they were politically well connected (Congressmen, Senators, Governors, etc.) and in a position to do the Marine Corps some good in the political arena. While I can't prove it, this would seem to be the case here!

We also made sure that “*political desirables*” were dutifully promoted, to keep 'em on our side in any upcoming legislative shenanigans that might well be brewing on the hill. Were these guys kept around because of their military expertise? Hell, some of these guys hadn't seen any active duty since Guadalcanal! Were they incompetent? Not necessarily of course, but in true political fashion they were used in a manner that would do the Marine Corps a maximum amount of good – and almost always this was in the political, NOT the military arena!

Were some of these guys well decorated? Most assuredly yes! One gent that comes to mind is Brigadier General Walter S. McIlhenny USMCR (Ret.). “Tobasco Mac” as he was called was also the CEO of McIlhenny Tobasco Company but worked for an oil company prior to WWII. He served as the XO and later CO of B Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines receiving the Navy Cross, Silver Star, and two Purple Hearts on Guadalcanal. This gentleman was the

“real McCoy”... He eventually became the CO of 3/5, and did one tour as the Intelligence Officer and was the Operations Officer of the 5th Marines during the landing on Peleliu. Upon return to the States in 1944, he completed the Instructor’s Orientation Course and the Army Artillery Officer’s Course at that time located at Ft. Benning Georgia. He was prepared to stay in the Corps, but following the demise of the last family member to run the *Tabasco Company*, he was released from active duty, and took over the family business. He remained in the Ready Reserve for many years, and following his retirement from the Marine Reserve, he was one of the founders of (and chief monetary contributors) of the Marine Military Academy in Harlingen, Texas. He voluntarily added the “mini-bottles of Tobasco Sauce) to the C-Rats issued in the latter stages of Vietnam. Obviously “Tobasco Mac” was also a guy to ride the river with...Not all of the reserve types are guys who just put in their time to get a little retirement. The money was obviously not a consideration, as a guy who owned the Tobasco Company was not hurting for money, nor was he angling for some sort of political office.

I don’t have a list of Murtha’s decorations, but apparently he has at least one Bronze Star (with “Combat Distinguishing Device”) and two Purple Hearts. As I have noted in the article “Stolen Valor” concerning Kerry, you could get a Purple Heart for any thing from a bleeding hangnail to having your head blown off. Unfortunately, I’d have to know the particulars of his purple hearts to pass judgment on his “ouchie” medals. I can state that Larry Keen is one of those whose .50 caliber wound would hardly qualify as a minor scratch. On the other hand, General Hochmuth got a purple heart for a bruise he received bumping his head going into a bunker during a mortar attack. He demanded to see the paperwork, and immediately changed the requirements to being open wounds (as opposed to internal bleeding – incidentally, both the Army and the Marines had the “Bruise type Purple Heart” in place for a spell!). It was noted however, none of the previously awarded Purple Hearts were rescinded after the order change, and General Hochmuth did not turn his in! More on this in my article “Stolen Valor”...

Several things Larry says do have a ring of truth. While not universally true, the Bronze Star was often given to company grade (and some field grade) officers as a sort of “Officer’s Good Conduct Medal” or as an End of Tour award. One friend of mine wound up with three Bronze Stars, all for Meritorious Service, vice Valorous Conduct. At the time, all naval awards of the Bronze Star rated the “V” if the award was given for service in a combat zone, and the “V” was known as “The Combat Distinguishing Device” – this has all been changed in the past few years, and *now* in the Naval Service, if the award is not for valor, the simple medal is awarded, with subsequent awards noted by gold stars. The

individual mentioned earlier had the “V” and two gold stars. Under current regulations he would simply be allowed the medal/ribbon with two stars. The “Combat Distinguishing Device” was also allowed on the Navy Commendation Medal, although it could be awarded for valorous conduct or meritorious service. Our Battalion Adjutant (a former 1st Sergeant) spent most of his time aboard the U.S.S. Tripoli keeping the paper flowing (necessary I suppose), but the rest of the Battalion spent almost 9 months in the field and took 800+ casualties. This guy was awarded the Bronze Star for his contributions to the war effort complete with “Combat Distinguishing Device”... Egad! And then there was an NCO who ran an especially squared away mess hall in Da Nang (so I’m told) who was awarded the Bronze Star (with “V”) for his exemplary dining facility. Every swab-jockey who was awarded anything while in “hostile waters” was also given his award with the Combat Distinguishing Device. Essentially, the Bronze Star or Navy Com with “V” became a “ho-hum” award unless you got to read the text of the award.

In all fairness, I’ve known individuals who received the Bronze Star and/or the Navy Com who should have been awarded Navy Crosses or Silver Stars... Much depended on literary talent of the gent writing up the award, so my comments are not a universal condemnation of those who got their Bronze Stars with “V”, some were well deserved, and underwritten - ...But those awarded for service as a staff officer were usually (as Larry has pointed out) given out as a reward for not shooting the Commanding Officer in the foot!

The Army has always kept the “V” device to indicate an award given for valorous conduct, much to their credit. The Navy and Marine Corps have since followed suit.

HOWEVER, what is not pointed out is that the Army gave away Bronze Stars like popcorn for little or no reason. During Korea, Dugout Doug (MacArthur) was a bit upset with the Corps for not awarding more medals (MacArthur kept a pocket full of the damned things and awarded the things on the spot, and had his awards guys come up with some reason later)!

Following WWII, the Army issued an order that allowed anyone who had been awarded the Combat Infantry Badge during the war could put in for and be awarded the Bronze Star (THIS IS A TRUE STORY)! So while on the surface it appeared that the Army kept the Bronze Star sacrosanct, this was in appearance only – you can judge the overall effect yourself.

Finally, MacArthur set a quota system for the Corps to award medals (to keep the Army from looking like they were giving the things away free!). A friend of

mine in Korea told me that about once a week they would fall the company in and ask if anyone would like a Bronze Star? The story goes that they were offered a promotion or a decoration and many (if not most) of those in the loop took the promotion. When I was a youngster in the Corps we were top heavy with Master Sergeants, Tech Sergeants (prior to bringing back the rank of Gunnery Sergeant), and so it went until about 1957/58 when the new rank structure (with 9 pay grades) could be instituted. Still it was quite a while until the top-heavy rank structure, a legacy of MacArthur's medal proliferation from Korea, thinned itself out.

Then there is the story of Admiral Mike Boorda, then serving as Chief of Naval Operations apparently committed suicide for wearing the Combat Distinguishing Device on a Navy Commendation Medal and a Navy Achievement Medal, apparently issued while he was in a sea-going mode during Vietnam. What was NOT said is that anyone issued such awards in what were termed "hostile waters" were automatically issued with the Combat V... Something stinks about this one, as he apparently committed suicide by shooting himself in the chest (some said with a shotgun?), suffering with extreme remorse for wearing something he wasn't authorized to wear? Dear Allah!

What really adds to the smell is, that his death was in the same time frame as William Colby's (the former head of the CIA) in a death from a boating accident while the dishes from supper were still on the table, the radio was playing and his computer was left on... Huh? Not only that but he wasn't wearing a life jacket, something that he was always known to do? I won't get into any conspiracy theories here, but I hardly think Admiral Boorda would have committed suicide for wearing a couple of "V" he apparently thought came with the awards (most did during that time frame).

During that particular time frame, many guys were stripped of their Combat Action Ribbons, only to have them re-entered in their record books, and I don't ever remember any sort of remorseful kickback from that fiasco (as I recall, until they finally worked out the details, the CAR was awarded, 'unawarded' and 'reawarded' several times until they finally gave up and gave one to everyone who served in the combat zone - what sort of red-blooded Marine would come home and say, yes I was in Vietnam, but didn't rate the Combat Action Ribbon? Yeah, right! Finally virtually everyone who set a foot in RVN rated one and they decided they had created an unmanageable award with no way to keep track of everyone who had been in Dong Ha, or Da Nang when a rocket landed inside the wire?

Originally it was to be awarded only to those infantry (or Corpsmen) who served in line companies in actual combat, not to be given to artillerymen who hadn't taken direct incoming enemy artillery fire, and of course the supply types wouldn't have rated one. Generals without a combat action ribbon? Unthinkable! – ah well, the intent was honorable even if the execution phase got screwed up!

DOWN TO THE WIRE

As I understand it, Murtha was an Intelligence Officer, and while there were some “Intel” types who got out of the wire and did some excellent work in the field, ‘twas not always so. ...However if a guy had a Bronze Star awarded while serving as an Intelligence Officer, even in an Infantry Battalion, I would take a fairly large bet that he received his “comrade hero” medal for meritorious service. Of course the far left (politically speaking) are not about to blow the whistle on Murtha, as it is to their advantage to have a “Marine Hero”, a wounded combat veteran of Vietnam and nominal “Hawk” to look like the administration screwed up and we are in a losing situation! As far as such as Barbara Boxer Shorts, and Diane Fine’swine’ are concerned, it’s a “see, I TOLD you so” and they have their own Marine Hero to prove it.

Wellllll... maybe, but!!! I know lots of guys who claim multiple tours in RVN who sat in supply warehouses or air conditioned Disbursing Offices, or worked in the admin branches in the Division Headquarters. Did they do several tours in RVN? Yep, but that ain't quite the same as having two (or more) tours in the rice paddy dikes or up next to the Ben Hai River either. What these guys do is allow as how, “yas, yas, I spent two tours in country but allow everyone else to fill in the blanks... I'd simply have to know more about Murtha's background and actual combat experience before I made a personal judgment. He may well have been a “Rambo” type, but then again...??? Plus I can see absolutely NO reason to keep Murtha on the active rolls of the USMCR for 37-years unless he was in a position to aid the Corps politically in the halls of Congress... ...And believe me, that's exactly what they do (or did in my time in the District Headquarters) to maintain a favorable political balance in Congress... You'll have to use your own judgment on this one...

Semper Fi,

Dick Culver