

How Jacqueline Kennedy Saved My Life

My diary says that on 9 November 1967 I was sitting at the edge of a foxhole sloshing with my boots the rain water which had fallen during the night—boots (green-canvased at their sides; with steel-plated soles) I had not taken off for three days...the Cambodian border was at my back...I was reading *A Discourse on Political Economy* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau...I was smoking an *Antonio y Cleopatra Grenadier* cigar...I was waiting for a wave of Huey choppers to come in and “extract” me and my infantry company—to which I had been assigned as an artillery forward observer—from one miserable hill, then to another... “My Girl” by The Temptations floated in the late morning’s breezes.

“Lieutenant! Lieutenant!! Lieutenant!!!”

I looked up and there stood an eighteen-year-old grunt from Tennessee screaming at me—his eyes filled with frustration and anger. In his hands he held a copy of *Stars and Stripes*—the soldier’s daily newspaper. The headline he had thrust in my face explained to me the motive for his excitement: JACKIE KENNEDY VISITS CAMBODIA.

“Lieutenant, how could she do that? How could she go on vacation there while we are fighting here? How could she be so inconsiderate?”

I tried to calm him down and succeeded somewhat. I just kept repeating myself to make him understand how we had been put into a difficult situation, and the best that we could do was to put up with it until our year was up. Surely, there were not enough words to ease his torment, but the fact that I had listened appeared to alleviate a bit his bafflement. The approaching choppers clok-cloked their presence in the distance. We had to get ready to go.

In the air I pondered the matter over and over and over. I thought back to a little concise statement I once had seen carved on my university dorm’s bathroom door: WE DO TO BE—Camus; WE BE TO DO—Sartre; DO BE DO BE DO—Sinatra! I at once felt I had to do something; I felt I had to choose to be free; and, I felt I could not let this predicament go unchallenged, could not let it escape the scrutiny of those who had sent us to war. I wanted this dilemma to be disentangled.

I wrote a letter to the President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson, protesting the circumstances. Further, I asked him if I could resign my commission in the middle of a war just as Secretary of Defence Robert

McNamara had done then just recently. I took the letter to my Division Artillery Commander, a full-bird colonel on the general’s promotion list, and asked him for his advice. He looked at me sternly, then commented succinctly: “Lieutenant, if you want to make the Army your career, don’t send it.” He walked away. Promotion, promotion, promotion! That was the obsession on most officers’ minds in Vietnam. I walked to the unit’s mail drop.

I received a letter from the Under Secretary of State for Asian Affairs, Dixon Donnelly, instructing me to pay heed to the Southeast Treaty Organisation (SEATO), and listen to the suggestions of my superiors. (I would not do otherwise!) A few weeks passed before I was removed from the field (combat zone). A supply sergeant in base camp told me I was a “P.I.,” Political Influence, and would not be sent to the field again for fear that I might “subvert” the thinking of the troops! He told me I would be assigned to those slots reserved for “dummy” lieutenants, and the record of those assignments would guarantee the end of my Army career. Why was I so lucky?

At this time, the events leading to the battle of Dak To were fermenting. My former unit was involved in the initial contacts of what would come to be the biggest battle of the “war.” My company lost thirteen and numerous wounded were reported. The unit was effectively deactivated. Individuals sent in my place were killed. What I had originally conceived to be a difficult—but necessary—decision made on my part, turned out also to be a tragedy for others.

Wherever I went after, to whatever unit I was attached to, I did my best, did what I was expected to do, did what all soldiers did in Vietnam: SCRATCHED OFF THE DAYS. I was called a coward. I was called a hippie. I was called Lieutenant Fuzz. “Sticks and stones will break your bones....”

For many years afterward, I mused on what Jacqueline Kennedy might have answered me if I had come to inform her about that absurd chain of events edifying neither for her nor for me.

Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit.

26 July 1999