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My Father, My Son

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Elmo Zumwalt Jr.

Elmo Zumwalt III

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Zumwalt, Elmo, Jr. and Zumwalt, Elmo III. *My Father, My Son*. New York: Macmillan, 1986. 320pp. \$18.95

This book is startling in many respects. Probably because of that, it has received wide publicity in periodicals, newspapers, and the electronic media. For those who missed the coverage, it is briefly recapped here.

Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Jr., as commander of naval forces in Vietnam (1968-1970), ordered the defoliation of river banks to reduce the dangers of ambush to U.S. Navy boat crews. His son, Lieutenant Elmo Zumwalt III, was skipper of one of them (1969-1970) in areas where Agent Orange was sprayed from aircraft. Some batches of Agent Orange were contaminated with dioxin. Elmo describes bathing in the contaminated rivers, eating local produce, wearing contaminated clothing for days at a time, while being unaware of any danger. A dozen years later, Elmo developed two forms of cancer—Hodgkins disease and lymphoma—both usually terminal. Meanwhile, Elmo's son, Russell, was found to have a serious learning disability. Both Zumwalts are convinced that the illnesses are the result of the Agent Orange. The U.S. Government claims there is insufficient evidence to substantiate the link.

Both Admiral and son stoically acknowledge that the defoliation was needed to save American lives. Elmo speculates that Agent Orange may have saved his life at the time, only to

take it from him later. (He quotes a fellow sufferer: "I got killed in Vietnam; I just didn't know it at the time.") The Admiral grimly states that even if he knew then what he knows now, he would still have ordered the defoliation. But he sees himself, ironically, as an instrument in his son's tragedy, which preoccupies him day and night.

Elmo III has undergone extensive treatment, including bone marrow transplant, and is still alive. The book closes on a note of hope.

Besides being startling, the book is easy to read, fast moving and has something for everyone. Award winning journalist, John Pekkanen, who collaborated with the Zumwalts on this book, also deserves much credit for the style and organization. In places it reads like a Harlequin romance with candlelight weddings in Shanghai and college love. In other places it reads like an Edward R. Murrow war report. There is a hair-raising account of Elmo's rule-breaking ambush incursion into Cambodia which influenced the Admiral to make changes in the conduct of the war. The way Elmo led his boat crew is classic and the examples cited would be useful in naval leadership training.

In still other passages, the book is like *Family* magazine, describing an obviously close family addicted to laughing, loving, and practical jokes. There is agony: some 50 pages of chemotherapy, bone marrow transplant, planning for death, and even the emotional letters of the dying.

There are some other very curious aspects of this book. It *dwells* on Elmo III's nightmare of a childhood: polio, heart disease, ruptured appendix, bicycle-auto accident, bronchial attacks, undersized stature, headaches, tiredness, allergies, "born old," and according to a fifth grade teacher, a "moron"; his two grandmothers died of cancer. All of this makes an important point. It portrays a survivor, a man with the stamina, courage, and inner strength to overcome all obstacles, to become a war hero and a successful lawyer, and to survive at least four years of cancer. There are some delightful vignettes, with spicy sarcasm, of famous personalities such as Nixon, Kissinger, Laird, Chafee, Nitze, and Abrams, among several others. Some of the anti-Nixon, anti-Kissinger, and anti-Moorer themes of *On Watch* are reprised.

The brunt of personal venom is directed at Admiral Thomas Moorer. In one passage, Admiral Zumwalt states that Vietnam had been a dumping ground for weak commanders and captains as a result of deliberate decisions made by Admiral Moorer. I arrived in Vietnam during Tet 1968, several months before Zumwalt arrived. True, I met some appallingly incompetent and corrupt officers, but I also saw top-notch replacements coming in. Admiral Moorer had made some personnel policy changes at least as early as 1967 to upgrade the "second-rate" Navy of Vietnam. Admiral Zumwalt himself is the best evidence of that policy change, but he writes that Moorer sent him to Vietnam to get

rid of him: "Promote the son of a bitch and nobody will ever hear from him again."

This is but one example of bitterness that surfaces in this book. The book is hard on the Navy and Navy life. There are references to racism, sexism, and clumsy bureaucracy. It matter-of-factly uses words such as "incestuous," "sexually promiscuous," "unacademic," and "snobbish" in describing Navy communities. It mentions mistakes by Navy medicine and naval intelligence. It speaks of the hard life at sea, midwatches and storms. Little bombs are dropped here and there: low pay, barroom brawl behavior, family separations, the endless "jumping around" of moving, and the difficulties of readjusting each time. But the book does not cover the other side of the ledger—the great strides taken forward; the good, happy, and rewarding side of Navy life. This I consider curious because I have personally heard Admiral Zumwalt speak of these in fond and glowing terms at other times and places. Except for the accounts of courage, loyalty and dedication in battle, this book is definitely not pro-Navy.

In my opinion, Admiral Zumwalt is not as bitter about the Navy as this book suggests. Nor do I believe the book is bitter by design; it just unfolds that way. There is ample reason for it, considering the timing of the writing, coinciding as it does with the monumental Zumwalt family tragedy.

If Father and Son wish to state one message above all others, I interpret

it as this: The jury is still out on Agent Orange; Agent Orange can cause cancer and birth defects; the lay evidence on Agent Orange, from the Vietnam veterans themselves, is ahead of the scientific evidence.

I hope we will see more from the pen of this prolific former CNO.

There is still a lot more we can learn from his experience. Meanwhile, I believe there are many Navy and non-Navy people who would join me in wishing well for the Zumwalt family in this dark hour.

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Bowman, William et al., eds. *The All-Volunteer Force after a Decade: Retrospect and Prospect*. Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1986. 352pp. \$32.50

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Breuer, William. *Devil Boats: The PT War Against Japan*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1987. 299pp. \$16.95

An anecdotal history of the PT war in the Pacific. Forward by Rear Admiral John D. Bulkeley, *Devil Boats* highlights actions from the U.S. forces being driven out of the Philippines to their return, including Bulkeley's removal of MacArthur and the "kidnapping" of President Quezon. An epilogue provides some interesting commentary on the more famous PT skippers—John Kennedy, Howard Baker, Robert