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VIETNAM VICTIM

Cancer-ridden son bears witness to Zumwalt's Agent Orange foray

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MY FATHER, MY SON

By Adm. Elmo Zumwalt Jr. and Lt. Elmo Zumwalt III, with John Pekkanen (Macmillan, \$18.95)

In August 1969, young Lt. Elmo Zumwalt III followed his father to war. Adm. Elmo Russell Zumwalt Jr., not yet Chief of U.S. Naval Operations, commanded the brown-water navy, patrolling the coasts and rivers of South Vietnam.

Young Elmo wished to test himself, not an easy thing for an admiral's son -- "Long before I arrived in Vietnam, I had heard a lot of Navy people were wondering what kind of cushy job I was going to get.' Thus he volunteered for river duty and became the commander of a swift patrol boat.

In the narrow and densely foliated rivers and canals of the Ca Mau peninsula, light boats lightly armed were particularly vulnerable to ambush. As Adm. Zumwalt explains, "Anyone serving a year's combat tour on the river boats had a 70-75 percent chance of being killed or wounded.'

These odds were considerably reduced by the admiral's well-known defoliation program, which removed much of the cover from hazardous river banks with Agent Orange. By the time of young Elmo's Vietnam tour in 1969-70, defoliation was ongoing and established. "Those of us out in the field had Agent Orange dropped on us, and had to live with the chemical on our clothes and skin for days at a time,' says Lt. Zumwalt.

The younger Zumwalt's Vietnam tour was a remarkable success. Twice awarded the Bronze Star, he brought himself and his crew out of the war alive and apparently uninjured. Of his son's first decoration, Adm. Zumwalt remarks, "I think it was one of those times when the fact that Elmo was my son worked against him.' The admiral thought Elmo should have had a Silver Star.

Vietnam indeed appeared the prelude to a life of uninterrupted success for a young man who had survived polio and heart surgery as a child, had been typed a slow learner and had lacked the grades to enter the Naval Academy. After the war, young Elmo married, completed his law degree at the University of North Carolina and entered a prestigious Fayetteville, N.C., law firm.

It is thus ironic that Elmo Zumwalt III considers himself a casualty of the Vietnam War, a belief his father shares. Elmo's 9-year-old son, Elmo Zumwalt IV, was born with a serious learning disability, and Elmo himself now suffers from two types of cancer. Nine months of chemotherapy and a bone-marrow transplant have arrested his malignancies only for the time being.

If the Zumwalts, father and son, believe that Agent Orange is the cause of Elmo's cancers and child's neurological disorder, both are pragmatic in facing the consequences of their shared belief. Neither blames the admiral for his decision to use the herbicide, and neither blames the Vietnam War for the son's misfortune. "I cannot say I am sorry, or feel any bitterness, for volunteering to go to Vietnam,' Elmo III reasons. "I made the choice and created my own destiny.' My Father, My Son only occasionally lapses into self-conscious evocation of the horrors of war or the chain of command. A family memoir, with occasional contributions by friends and shipmates, it is a simple-hearted book about love and courage in the face of adversity.

In the years since his son's illness, Adm. Zumwalt has devoted himself to securing the future for Elmo's children, particularly for boy, who may be severely handicapped as an adult. The admiral's daughter, Mouzetta, thinks her father has been hardest hit by the tragedy. "I think he feels Elmo's pain,' she says. In donating the bone marrow for her brother's transplant, Mouzetta considers the disruption of her own life trivial "compared to what Elmo was going through.'

Elmo Zumwalt III characterizes his experience with cancer as "a process of diminishing expectations and choices.' Perhaps some zero point of expectation has been reached as he chooses to go ahead with the bone-marrow transplant after nine months of chemotherapy has failed to halt the diseases spreading through his

lymphatic system.

Though the transplant gives him only a 40 percent chance of cure, and though the side effects of the procedure are painful, Elmo decided to go ahead because of his personal values. "I love Kathy, Maya, Russell, my family, and life and I wanted to do the one thing that would give me a chance at being with them for a long time.' He and his wife, Kathy Counselman, seem almost telepathic as the family draws together in response to this last extremity.

As he suffers in a Seattle hospital's bacteria-free bubble, young Elmo appears to his family to have aged 30 years. His son can bear to see him only for a few moments, after which he runs from the room, lies down on a bench outside and falls asleep immediately. Still, the family endures as a whole with good humor. At one point, the patient's daughter, Maya, describes her father's losing his hair. "He was totally bald. I was real shocked because he had his hair when I had seen him earlier that day. Dad smiled at me and said, "How do you like my new haircut?"

The bone-marrow transplant apparently has succeeded. At this writing, Elmo is recovering at his family's summer home in Pinehurst, N.C. The hope that he has once again beaten the odds grows stronger with each day. It is worth pointing out that the copyright to his book, including movie and TV rights, rests with his son's trustees. It also should be said that this is a valuable book, which should be widely read.

Still, My Father, My Son is a war story. How Vietnam holds it together may be seen in a letter young Elmo writes to his father in the expectation that he may not survive the bone-marrow transplant. "Both in Vietnam and with my cancers, we fought battles and lost. Yet, we always knew even when the battle was clearly desperate, that our love could not be compromised.'

Julian Long lives and writes in Denton, where he is associated with the Center for Texas Studies at North Texas State University.

Caption:

PHOTOS: 1. Lt. Elmo Zumwalt III served in Vietnam while his father, Adm. Elmo Zumwalt Jr., commanded the Navy's operations along the country's coasts and rivers.; 2. By the time the younger Zumwalt arrived in Vietnam as a patrol boat commander in the late '60s, his father's Agent Orange defoliation program was well-established. (Special to The Dallas Morning News) ; LOCATION: 1. - 2. NR.

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