

President Bush's Military Record; Final Thoughts

By: Anthony J. Sacco © September 2004.
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PINE BLUFFS—Recently, John Kerry was pummeled by claims that he embellished his Vietnam record and parlayed his superficial wounds into an early discharge. Reeling under these attacks, liberals needed a strategy to take the heat off their man. Two weeks ago, I wrote (PBP, 9/9/04), “Kerry’s advisors will try to deflect debate from their candidate’s service record to the President’s.”

They did. Shopworn claims about Mr. Bush, vetted in 1996 and again in 2000, were dusted off. But vitriol, disdain for truth, and political expediency produced a new twist; introduction of forged documents into the public debate.

“They’re forged as hell,” Earl Lively, Director of the Texas Air National Guard when Mr. Bush served, told *The Washington Times* (9/12/04). “There’s no way (squadron commander) Jerry Killian would have written what they’ve come up with.” His reference was to documents aired on CBS purportedly showing that Lt. Col Killian felt pressured by his superior officer, Col. Walter Stout, to “sugarcoat” Bush’s record.

But both officers wrote favorable evaluations of Lt. Bush. Here are three: “Lt. Bush stands out as a top notch fighter pilot ... a natural leader whom his contemporaries look to for leadership.” And “... an exceptionally fine young officer and pilot who continually flies intercept missions with the unit to improve his proficiency even further,” and “... an exceptional fighter interceptor pilot and officer.” Since they wrote such glowing proficiency ratings, neither man would have had any reason to “sugarcoat” Lt. Bush’s record. His performance was excellent.

Most telling on the forged documents issue was this. The “memo” allegedly written by Killian to Stout carried a date in late 1973. But Stout had been honorably discharged in March 1972, eighteen months before. Whoever orchestrated this scheme didn’t check the timeline.

Finally, Mort Zucherman, *U.S. News & World Report*, (Scarborough Country, 9/16/04), said; “The preponderance of evidence is that these documents are false.”

What about allegations by filmmaker Michael Moore and DNC chairman, Terry McAuliffe, respectively, that “Bush deserted” or was “AWOL?” Groundless. People familiar with the Air Guard know that guardsmen were required to earn a minimum of 50 points annually to meet standards. Byron York, White House Correspondent for *National Review* wrote: “According to records ... Bush earned 253 points his first (flight training) year. Then, from May 1969 to May 1970 (first year after flight training) – 340; from May 1970 to May 1971 – 137; and from May 1971 to May 1972 – 112. The numbers indicate . . . Bush not only showed up, but he showed up a lot.” And every time he slid into the cockpit of that supersonic aircraft and took it up, he placed his life on the line.

Liberals charge that Mr. Bush joined the Guard to avoid Vietnam and that the Bush family pulled strings to get him in. That doesn’t hold water. First, Guard outfits were subject to call-up at a moment’s notice. The Guard was no hiding place for peaceniks or draft dodgers. If President Johnson had so decreed, the 111th Fighter Interceptor Squadron could have found itself in Vietnam. Second, biographer Bill Minutaglio, in his book, *First Son: George W. Bush and the Bush Family Dynasty*, quotes military officials familiar with procedures for applying to the Guard *and* with George Bush, as knowing of no pressure and doubting if this could have happened. Third, David Aikman, in *A Man of Faith:: the Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush*, writes: “... It’s

highly unlikely that someone could be admitted to any flight training program in the United States without meeting stringent skill requirements determined through rigorous testing. Flying a supersonic jet that costs millions of dollars and whose crash could cost several lives isn't something entrusted to the first person to come through the door with the right last name." Make sense?

Why did Mr. Bush join the Air Guard? Aikman again: "There's a simple reason for Bush joining the Texas Air National Guard: it was the closest he could come to replicating another aspect of his father's brilliant career. In fact, when asked by the Commander of the 147th Fighter Group what the *real* reason was for his wanting to join the Texas ANG, George W's response was quite simple: 'I want to be a fighter pilot because my father was.'"

Some have alleged that Lt. Bush's temporary assignment to the 187th TRG in Montgomery in September 1972 showed favoritism. Lt. Bush was granted permission by Col. Killian and the Group commander. Col. William Campenni (retired) U.S. ANG, who served with Lt. Bush in 1970-1971, (*Washington Times* (2/11/04) explains: "If you check the 111th FIS records ... you'll find other pilots excused for career obligations and conflicts. The Bush excusal ... was further facilitated by a change in mission, from an operational fighter squadron to a training squadron with a new airplane, the F-101, which required more pilots to be available for full-time duty rather than part-time traditional reservists with outside employment."

Finally, Lt. Bush did not disobey an order regarding his flight physical. After arriving in Alabama, he served in the position of Flight Safety Officer, on non-flight status. A pilot on non-flight status is not required to take a flight physical. Waiting to see what his status would be in Montgomery was neither disobedience nor insubordination.

Mr. Bush served five years and four months of a six-year commitment. Was an early discharge preferential treatment? No. It was quite common. Both Al Gore and John Kerry received early discharges; Mr. Kerry's came eight months prior the end of *his* tour.

This instructive but unproductive interlude now behind us, voters can focus on issues like the President's plans if he's re-elected, what Homeland Security is doing to protect Americans, and good things transpiring in Afghanistan and Iraq. Afghanistan holds general elections next month. Iraq's interim government, elections scheduled for January, has established administrative and judicial systems essential to a stable society. The Middle East is changing. Democracy is blooming. Knowledge of these and other substantive issues will enable an informed electorate to choose the best candidate as president in November.