

President Bush's National Guard Service: Setting the Record Straight

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PINE BLUFFS—Allegations of untruths and inflated statements by John Kerry about his Vietnam service are having an effect. Most damaging to date is that Mr. Kerry apparently wrote his own After Action Reports, which were used to justify awarding his medals. Polls after the Democrat Convention showed Mr. Kerry and Mr. Bush tied for support among veterans at 45%. Now they show Mr. Bush leading 55% to 37%.

In 2000, enlightened by Bill Clinton's proclivities, we easily spotted Al Gore's tendency to embellish, exaggerate and even fabricate. Wanting no more of that, we rejected his presidential bid. For Mr. Gore and Mr. Clinton, post-modernist men, truth is unimportant; it's whatever they want it to be at the moment. Each told us what we wanted to hear, to get our vote. Mr. Kerry seems poured from the same mold.

That's a serious problem. A John Kerry perceived as untruthful will lose to Mr. Bush, who is strong on that issue. Character *does* count. Kerry's advisors will try to deflect debate from their candidate's service record to the President's.

It's already happening. Last week, Mr. Kerry, alarmed by the bleeding, challenged the President to debate their military records. Recently on Scarborough Country the issue was aired, and Steve McMahon, a Democrat Party Strategist, made this statement: "There has never been a single person who can corroborate that George Bush performed part of his service with the Alabama Air National Guard as he said he did. Not one."

Is that statement true? No! On February 13, 2004, a retired ANG officer who served with the 187th Tactical Reconnaissance Group in Montgomery, Alabama in 1972-1973, was interviewed by the Associated Press. He reported that Lt. Bush showed up for duty there in 1972. "I saw him each drill period," Lt. Colonel John Calhoun said. "He was very aggressive about doing his duty there. He was dedicated to what he was doing in the Guard. He showed up on time, and he left at the end of the day."

Lt. Bush, a member of the 111th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, Texas ANG at the time, had requested temporary re-assignment to Calhoun's unit on 9/5/72, to work for the Senatorial campaign of Winton Blount. Permission was granted on 9/11/72. But the 187th TRG, having little use for a transitory member in a high-skill category like a pilot, placed Lt. Bush in an administrative position — Flight Safety Officer — on non-flight status. Colonel Calhoun again: "He sat in my office most of the time. He had training manuals from the aircraft he was flying. He'd study them. He'd read safety magazines, which is a common thing for pilots."

Was Lt. Bush's temporary assignment a "show of favoritism"? Col. William Campenni (retired) U.S. Air Force/ANG, who served with Lt. Bush during 1970-1971, in a letter to the Washington Times (2/11/04): "If you check the 111th FIS records from 1970-72, you'll find other pilots excused for career obligations and conflicts. The Bush excusal in 1972 was further facilitated by a change in the unit's 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 instruction duty rather than part-time traditional reservists with outside employment.

"The winding down of the Vietnam War in 1971 provided a flood of exiting active duty pilots for these instructor jobs, making part-timers like Lt. Bush and me

superfluous. There was a huge glut of pilots in 1972, and with no cockpits available to put them in, many were shoved into non-flying desk jobs. Any pilot could have left the Air Force or the Air Guard with ease after 1972 before his commitment was up because there just wasn't room for all of them."

Why wasn't Lt. Bush re-trained on the F-101? Re-training a pilot on a new aircraft took thirteen months. By the end of 1972, Lt. Bush had less than a year left on his enlistment. ANG policy dictated not spending the money in those cases. So, in 1973, after serving five years and four months of his six-year commitment, George Bush was honorably discharged. That fall found him enrolled in the Harvard Business School.

This wasn't uncommon. Al Gore was granted an early discharge from the Army to attend Princeton Divinity School. He didn't go. And Mr. Kerry, after his third Purple Heart, applied for an early trip home and was released eight months prior to the end of his tour.

The shopworn charges about Mr. Bush's record failed in 2000 because the facts don't show fabrications. If they are aired again, it will only inflame former Air National Guardsmen who were primarily responsible for the air defense of mainland U.S.A. during the Cold War, and Army, Air Guardsmen and Navel Reserve members who served proudly in Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War I, Afghanistan and Iraq, thus further eroding John Kerry's support among veterans.