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Bush in the National Guard: A primer

The flap over dubious documents has obscured the real story. Here it is.

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Under order from U.S. District Court Judge Harold Baer Jr. to find and make public any of President Bush's military records that had not already been released, the Pentagon late on Friday released yet another batch of documents. None of the new paperwork addresses the lingering questions surrounding Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard during the height of the Vietnam War, how Bush's own records indicate he missed mandatory duty for months at a time, or how he managed to go unsupervised for nearly two years. The federal court order stems from an ongoing lawsuit filed by the Associated Press in June to obtain all of Bush's relevant records. In February, when White House aides told reporters they had made public "absolutely everything" about Bush's military service, (<http://www.usatoday.com/news/2004-02-14-bush-docs.htm>) the AP noticed several obvious gaps and went to court to obtain additional documents.

The lawsuit had already resulted in the disclosure of previously unreleased flight logs that indicated that Bush, a fully trained pilot since 1970, often flew two-seater training jets in March 1972, shortly before he piloted a plane for the last time. This despite his promise, (http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2004/09/14/bush_service/index.html) when he entered the Guard's training program, to serve as a full pilot until 1974.

What is also already known is that in the spring of 1972, with 770 days left of required duty, Bush unilaterally decided that he was done fulfilling his military obligation. Also in the spring of 1972, Bush refused to take a physical and quickly cleared out of his Guard base in Houston, heading off to work on the Senate campaign of Winton "Red" Blount in Alabama. Referring to that period, one of Bush's Guard flying buddies remarked to USA Today in 2002, "It was an irrational time in his life."

It may have been an irrational time for him, but Bush managed to focus intently on not serving in the Guard in any significant capacity again. His public records paint a portrait of a

in the Guard in any significant capacity against his public record as painted portrait of a Guardsman who, with the cooperation of his Texas Air National Guard superiors, simply flouted regulation after regulation (more than 30 by Salon's count) indifferent to his signed obligation to serve.

The details can get a bit obscure, but the basic timeline of Bush's service between 1972 and 1974 is easy to follow: In spring 1972 Bush attempted to permanently transfer to a non-flying Alabama Guard unit. During the second half of 1972 he missed many (http://users.cis.net/coldfeet/doc23.gif) of his required weekend training drills. At the end of the year he returned to Houston. Bush then had to make up the absences he had stacked up while in Alabama through "substitute service" training in 1972 and 1973. In July 1973, Bush asked to be released by the Texas Air National Guard so he could attend Harvard Business School. In September, the Guard let him go, and the Air Force officially dismissed Bush in November 1974.

Yet looking at the already available public records, they raise as many questions as they answer about Bush and his surrogates' accounts of his service — because from his Alabama transfer to his missed physical to his substitute service to his "inactive status" to his honorable discharge, it was as if Air Force and Guard regulations simply did not apply to Lt. Bush. He seemed to become a ghostlike figure, doing — or not doing — whatever he pleased, unsupervised and unrated by his commanders. One serious question is whether some of Bush's superiors may have played an active role in hiding Bush's shoddy record — pressured perhaps by powerful politicians — by crediting him with crucial makeup training days that appear dubious in nature.

None of the discrepancies detailed below between Bush's accounts and what his records show are based on the disputed memos reportedly written by Lt. Col. Jerry Killian that were aired by CBS News two weeks ago. CBS executives now concede they have concerns about the memos' authenticity, but stress that the contents accurately reflect the turmoil Bush and his chronic absenteeism created for the Texas Air National Guard, as reported by others who worked with Killian. In an interview with New Hampshire's Manchester Union Leader on Saturday, Bush would not say the documents were forgeries. He added, "There are a lot of questions about the documents and they need to be answered." But the authenticity of the memos, which contain very few facts about Bush's actual service, is a sideshow in the effort to determine the truth about Bush's military service. (Independent researchers such as Paul Lukasiak, retired Army Col. Gerald Lechliter and Marty Heldt have contributed to this ongoing effort to uncover the facts.)

Consider the following anomalies:

(Note that statements below that certain documents do not exist, or that Bush failed to obtain proper authorization, are based on the White House's repeated insistence that all relevant Bush military documents have been made public. Some of these documents, of course, may yet turn up.)

Bush flew for the last time on April 16, 1972. Upon entering the Guard, Bush agreed to fly for 60 months. After his training was complete, he owed 53 months of flying.

But he flew for only 22 of those 53 months.

Upon being accepted for pilot training, Bush promised (http://www.glcq.com/docs/redacted_five_year.pdf) to serve with his parent (Texas) Guard unit for five years once he completed his pilot training.

But Bush served as a pilot with his parent unit for just two years.

In May 1972 Bush left the Houston Guard base for Alabama. According to Air Force regulations, (<http://glcq.com/regs/chapter10.pdf>) Bush was supposed to obtain prior authorization before leaving Texas to join a new Guard unit in Alabama.

But Bush failed to get the authorization.

In requesting a permanent transfer to a nonflying unit in Alabama in 1972, Bush was supposed to sign an acknowledgment that he received relocation counseling.

But no such document exists.

He was supposed to receive a certification of satisfactory participation from his unit.

But Bush did not.

He was supposed to sign and give a letter of resignation to his Texas unit commander.

But Bush did not.

He was supposed to receive discharge orders from the Texas Air National Guard adjutant general.

But Bush did not.

He was supposed to receive new assignment orders for the Air Force Reserves.

But Bush did not.

On his transfer request Bush was asked to list his "permanent address."

But he wrote down a post office box number for the campaign he was working for on a temporary basis.

On his transfer request Bush was asked to list his Air Force specialty code.

But Bush, an F-102 pilot, erroneously wrote the code for an F-89 or F-94 pilot. Both planes had been retired from service at the time. Bush, an officer, made this mistake more than once on the same form.

On May 26, 1972, Lt. Col. Reese Bricken, commander of the 9921st Air Reserve Squadron at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, informed Bush (<http://users.cis.net/coldfeet/doc6.gif>) that a transfer to his nonflying unit would be unsuitable for a fully trained pilot such as he was, and that Bush would not be able to fulfill any of his remaining two years of flight obligation.

But Bush pressed on with his transfer request nonetheless.

Bush's transfer request to the 9921st was eventually denied by the Air Reserve Personnel Center in Denver, which meant he was still obligated to attend training sessions one weekend a month with his Texas unit in Houston.

But Bush failed to attend weekend drills in May, June, July, August and September. He also failed to request permission to make up those days at the time.

According to Air Force regulations, "[a] member whose attendance record is poor must be closely monitored. When the unexcused absences reach one less than the maximum permitted [sic] he must be counseled and a record made of the counseling. If the member is unavailable he must be advised by personal letter."

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But there is no record that Bush ever received such counseling, despite the fact that he missed drills for months on end.

Bush's unit was obligated to report in writing to the Personnel Center at Randolph Air Force Base whenever a monthly review of records showed unsatisfactory participation for an officer. But his unit never reported Bush's absenteeism to Randolph Air Force Base.

In July 1972 Bush failed to take a mandatory Guard physical exam, which is a serious offense for

a Guard pilot. The move should have prompted the formation of a Flying Evaluation Board to investigate the circumstances surrounding Bush's failure.

But no such FEB was convened.

Once Bush was grounded for failing to take a physical, his commanders could have filed a report on why the suspension should be lifted.

But Bush's commanders made no such request.

On Sept. 15, 1972, Bush was ordered to report to Lt. Col. William Turnipseed, the deputy commander of the 187th Tactical Reconnaissance Group in Montgomery, Ala., to participate in training on the weekends of Oct. 7-8 and Nov. 4-5, 1972.

But there's no evidence Bush ever showed up on those dates. In 2000, Turnipseed told the Boston Globe that Bush did not report for duty. (A self-professed Bush supporter, Turnipseed has since backed off from his categorical claim.)

However, according to the White House-released pay records, which are unsigned, Bush was credited for serving in Montgomery on Oct. 28-29 and Nov. 11-14, 1972. Those makeup dates should have produced a paper trail, including Bush's formal request as well as authorization and supervision documents.

But no such documents exist, and the dates he was credited for do not match the dates when the Montgomery unit assembled for drills.

When Guardsmen miss monthly drills, or "unit training assemblies" (UTAs), they are allowed to make them up through substitute service and earn crucial points toward their service record. Drills are worth one point on a weekday and two points on each weekend day. For Bush's substitute service on Nov. 13-14, 1972, he was awarded four points, two for each day.

But Nov. 13 and 14 were both weekdays. He should have been awarded two points.

Bush earned six points for service on Jan. 4-6, 1973 — a Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

But he should have earned four points, one each for Thursday and Friday, two for Saturday.

Weekday training was the exception in the Guard. For example, from May 1968 to May 1972, when Bush was in good standing, he was not credited with attending a single weekday UTA.

But after 1972, when Bush's absenteeism accelerated, nearly half of his credited UTAs were for weekdays.

To maintain unit cohesiveness, the parameters for substitute service are tightly controlled; drills must be made up within 15 days immediately before, or 30 days immediately after, the

originally scheduled drill, according to Guard regulations at the time.

But more than half of the substitute service credits Bush received fell outside that clear time frame. In one case, he made up a drill nine weeks in advance.

On Sept. 29, 1972, Bush was formally grounded (<http://users.cis.net/coldfeet/grounded.gif>) for failing to take a flight physical. The letter, written by Maj. Gen. Francis Greenlief, chief of the National Guard Bureau, ordered Bush to acknowledge in writing that he had received word of his grounding.

But no such written acknowledgment exists. In 2000, Bush spokesman Dan Bartlett told the Boston Globe that Bush couldn't remember if he'd ever been grounded.

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Bartlett also told the Boston Globe that Bush didn't undergo a physical while in Alabama because his family doctor was in Houston.

But only Air Force flight surgeons can give flight physicals to pilots.

Guard members are required to take a physical exam every 12 months.

But Bush's last Guard physical was in May 1971. Bush was formally discharged from the service in November 1974, which means he went without a required physical for 42 months.

Bush's unsatisfactory participation in the fall of 1972 should have prompted the Texas Air National Guard to write to his local draft board and inform the board that Bush had become eligible for the draft. Guard units across the country contacted draft boards every Sept. 15 to update them on the status of local Guard members. Bush's absenteeism should have prompted what's known as a DD Form 44, (http://www.glcq.com/regs/dd44_instructions.gif) "Record of Military Status of Registrant."

But there is no record of any such document having been sent to Bush's draft board in

Houston.

Records released by the White House note that Bush received a military dental exam in Alabama on Jan. 6, 1973.

But Bush's request to serve in Alabama covered only September, October and November 1972. Why he would still be serving in Alabama months after that remains unclear.

Each of Bush's numerous substitute service requests should have formed a lengthy paper trail consisting of AF Form 40a's, with the name of the officer who authorized the training in advance, the signature of the officer who supervised the training and Bush's own signature.

But no such documents exist.

During his last year with the Texas Air National Guard, Bush missed nearly two-thirds of his mandatory UTAs and made up some of them with substitute service. Guard regulations allowed substitute service only in circumstances that are "beyond the control" of the Guard member.

But neither Bush nor the Texas Air National Guard has ever explained what the uncontrollable circumstances were that forced him to miss the majority of his assigned drills in his last year.

Bush supposedly returned to his Houston unit in April 1973 and served two days.

But at the end of April, when Bush's Texas commanders had to rate him for their annual report, they wrote that they could not do so: "Lt. Bush has not been observed at this unit during the period of this report."

On June 29, 1973, the Air Reserve Personnel Center in Denver instructed (<http://users.cis.net/coldfeet/doc12.gif>) Bush's commanders to get additional information from his Alabama unit, where he had supposedly been training, in order to better evaluate Bush's duty. The ARPC gave Texas a deadline of Aug. 6 to get the information.

But Bush's commanders ignored the request.

Bush was credited for attending four days of UTAs with his Texas unit July 16-19, 1973. That was good for eight crucial points.

But that's not possible. Guard units hold only two UTAs each month — one on a Saturday and one on a Sunday. Although Bush may well have made up four days, they should not all have been counted as UTAs, since they occur just twice a month. The other days are known as "Appropriate Duty," or APDY.

On July 30, 1973, Bush, preparing to attend Harvard Business School, signed a statement acknowledging it was his responsibility to find another unit in which to serve out the remaining

nine months of his commitment.

But Bush never contacted another unit in Massachusetts in which to fulfill his obligation.


Despite the laundry list of Guard discrepancies, Bush, when asked about his service this weekend, insisted, "I did everything [my superiors] asked me to do."

(http://www.salon.com/2004/09/20/bush_guard_records/)

Eric Boehlert, a former senior writer for Salon, is the author of "Lapdogs: How the Press Rolled Over for Bush."

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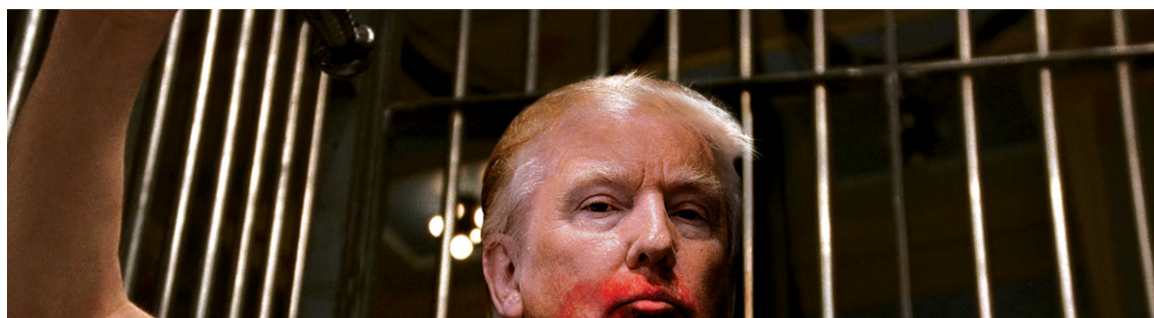
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