



Records show Bush's grades as pilot

'Missing' papers turn up after lawsuit seeks them

By Matt Kelley

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WASHINGTON - President Bush was ranked in the middle of his Air National Guard class and flew more than 336 hours in a fighter jet before letting his pilot status lapse and missing a key readiness drill, according to his flight records belatedly uncovered Tuesday under the Freedom of Information Act.

The Defense Department and Bush's campaign have claimed for months that all records detailing his fighter pilot career have been made public, but defense officials said they found two dozen new records detailing his training and flight logs after The Associated Press filed a lawsuit and crafted new requests under the public records law.

"Previous requests from other requesters for President Bush's Individual Flight Records did not lead to the discovery of these records because at the time President Bush left the service, flight records were subject to retention for only 24 months and we understood that neither the Air Force nor the Texas Air National Guard retained such records thereafter," the Defense Department told the AP.

"Out of an abundance of caution," the government "searched a file that had been preserved in spite of this policy" and found the Bush records, the letter said. "The Department of Defense regrets this oversight during the previous search efforts."

Middle of the pack

The records show that Bush, a lieutenant in the Texas Air National Guard, was ranked No. 22 in a class of 53 pilots when he finished his flight training at Moody Air Force Base, Ga., in 1969.

Over the next three years, he logged 326.4 hours as a pilot and an additional 9.9 hours as a co-pilot, most of it in the F-102a jet used to intercept enemy aircraft.

The records show that his last flight came in April 1972, which is consistent with pay records that show that Bush had a large lapse of duty between April and October of that year, a time he says he went to Alabama to work on an unsuccessful Republican Senate campaign. Bush skipped a required medical exam that cost him his pilot's status in August 1972.

A six-month historical record of his 147th Fighter Interceptor Group, which was also turned over to the AP on Tuesday, shows some of the training Bush missed with his colleagues during that time.

Significantly, it showed that the unit joined a "24-hour active alert mission to safeguard against surprise attack" in the Southern United States beginning Oct. 6, 1972, a time when Bush did not report for duty, according to his pay records.

Bush's lone service in October came at another air base in Alabama, where he sought temporary permission to train away from his assigned squadron.

As part of the mission, the 147th kept two F-102a jets — the same jets Bush flew before he lost his flight status for skipping a required medical exam — on ready alert to be launched within five minutes' warning.

The records also indicate that Bush made good grades, scoring an 88 on total airmanship and earning perfect 100s for flying without navigational instruments, operating a T-38 System and studying applied aerodynamics. Other scores ranged from 89 in flight planning to 98 in aviation physiology.

Legacy of Vietnam

Military service during the Vietnam War has become an issue in the presidential election as both candidates debate the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Democratic presidential nominee, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, commanded a Navy Swift Boat in Vietnam and was awarded five medals, including a Silver Star. But his heroism has been challenged in ads by some veterans who support Bush.

Democrats have accused Bush of shirking his Guard service and getting favored treatment as the son of a prominent Washington figure.

"I'm proud of my service," Bush said at a rally last weekend in Lima, Ohio.

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