

THE QUESTION BUSH NEVER GOT ASKED

Did he, as a Navy pilot, strafe a lifeboat? By Mark Herrgard

In the closing weeks of the 1992 presidential campaign, a four-page document called a naval aircraft action report was presented to several news organizations. The last page of the forty-eight-year-old report (published here for the first time, enhanced for legibility) contains strong circumstantial evidence suggesting that George Bush committed a war crime as a rookie Navy pilot in the South Pacific during World War II. Based on interviews with pilots immediately after a mission, the document describes what the pilots and their crews saw and did on July 25, 1944. It reports that two lifeboats carrying survivors of a trawler that Bush's plane had just sunk were strafed—that is, machine-gunned from the air. Strafing of defenseless combatants in lifeboats was, and is, considered a war crime under international military law. The document, incriminating as it appears to be, doesn't constitute irrefutable proof of guilt. Bush may have a convincing explanation. If so, he was not asked to provide it by any one of at least three major news organizations (Newsweek, the Los Angeles Times, and U.S. News & World Report) that could have published this document last October but didn't—though not because of any intimidation by the White House. The censorship, as usual with the American news media, was entirely self-inflicted.

The sinking of this trawler in Koroangel Lagoon, in the Palau Islands of the South Pacific, was Bush's first solo combat "kill." Forty-eight years later, in a struggle for re-election, Bush would make his wartime exploits a campaign issue. Setting on the controversy surrounding Bill Clinton's opposition to the Vietnam War, Bush repeatedly called on Clinton to "come clean" about having avoided the draft and participated in antiwar demonstrations. Bush insisted that Clinton had to stand up to what he did as a young man. This sentiment was taken to heart by an anonymous federal researcher who, in early 1991, had become familiar with this report in the course of his work. The researcher first kept quiet because he didn't want to undercut Bush during the Gulf war. Watching Bush politicize war records eighteen months later, however, he decided the public should know about the report. He lived far from the media centers of New York and Washington and knew no reporters, but he became acquainted with Paula Ogburn, a freelance writer in Orange County, California. Ogburn regarded the story as beyond her expertise but promised to try to interest fellow journalists in it.

This sentence states plainly that the strafing took place. "VT" refers to Bush's squadron, which included Bush's plane and a second bomber, piloted by Lt. R. R. Houle. But did both Bush and Houle strafe lifeboats? Was "VT" singular or plural? U.S. Navy archivists say that the plural usage, though not universal, was by far the most common, and certainly it was standard for a wingman (Bush) and his leader (Houle) to stick together in such circumstances. Moreover, three sentences earlier, "VT" is used plurally to report that Houle and Bush had together attacked the trawler (though Houle's bomb missed). In short, the evidence strongly suggests both planes strafed the lifeboats.

SECRET DECLASSIFIED

THE ACTION REPORT, dated October 1944, was prepared by 259 Albatross Squadron, U.S. Navy, and was classified "Secret" because it contained information of a confidential nature. The report is a copy of the original report, which was prepared by the squadron commander, Lt. R. R. Houle, and was submitted to the Navy Department for review. The report is a copy of the original report, which was prepared by the squadron commander, Lt. R. R. Houle, and was submitted to the Navy Department for review. The report is a copy of the original report, which was prepared by the squadron commander, Lt. R. R. Houle, and was submitted to the Navy Department for review.

REPORT PREPARED BY: 1. NAME: [REDACTED] 2. GRADE: [REDACTED] 3. COMMAND: [REDACTED] 4. DATE: [REDACTED] 5. LOCATION: [REDACTED] 6. SUBJECT: [REDACTED] 7. CLASSIFICATION: [REDACTED] 8. REVIEWED BY: [REDACTED] 9. DATE REVIEWED: [REDACTED] 10. COMMENTS: [REDACTED]

The name "En. G.H.W. Bush" got Ogburn a hearing with key journalists, albeit a wary one. It was the second week of October, barely three weeks before Election Day, and the journalists were rightly cautious about being taken in by a political dirty-tricks operation. But authenticating the Navy document was no problem: it was on file in the Naval Archives. The real trouble, the journalists now say, was that the document was not enough of a smoking gun. "We couldn't confirm that George Bush's plane was involved in the strafing," explains U.S. News & World's senior editor Lee Rains. The document was interesting but "not a self-fulfilling story," recalls editor Roger Smith of the Los Angeles Times. Newsweek, which pursued the story the furthest, even going to the trouble of trying to track down survivors in Japan, ultimately decided, in the words of Washington bureau chief Evan Thomas, "There were too many other possible explanations." Off-the-record interviews with White House sources cast "doubt on the credibility of the evidence," adds Newsweek's chief of correspondents, Ann McDaniel.

The account of strafing fighter planes (VF) also filed their own aircraft action report, but that document neither confirms nor contradicts the lifeboat strafing reported here. It simply doesn't mention it—hardly surprising, given the illegality of such an act. The warty gunner in Houle's bomber, Charles Y. Bynum, says he doesn't recall any strafing but says, "I may have happened," and he agrees that the best way to clear up the question is simply to ask Bush what happened and to publish the document with his response. Such an approach apparently didn't occur to the high-powered journalists whose deference and self-censorship silenced this story. Popular mythology craves sinister explanations—threatening calls from the Oval Office—when the media don't run a politically damaging story. The truth is more innocuous. "If the same kind of document had surfaced implicating the prime minister of Japan in a war crime, American journalists would have gone to town on it," argues MIT historian John Dover, whose book, *War Without Mercy*, documented the systematic strafing of Japanese lifeboats by American and Australian forces during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in 1943. Paula Ogburn's unwitting mistake lay in not recognizing that American journalists would act on the story—in keeping with their habit of giving the President the benefit of the doubt on serious issues, especially just before an election. Ogburn would have done better to give this document to Tokyo's Yomiuri Shinbun or Paris's *Le Monde* or London's *Independent*—news organizations whose judgment is unclouded by misplaced American fears and loyalties. As for George Bush's response to what happened on July 25, 1944? I provided his House-son office with a copy of this document and posed the question. The reply, after many calls, "no comment."

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