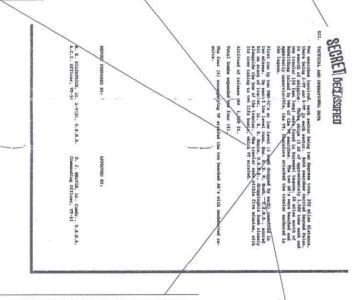
THE QUESTION BUSH NEVER GOT ASKED

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

In the closing weeks of the 1992 presidential campaign, a four-page document called a navel 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 rookle 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 crees saw and did on July 25, 1944. It reports that two lifebouts carrying survivors of a trawler that Bush's plane had just sunk were strated—that is, machine-ganned from the air. Strafing of defenseless combaumats in lifebouts was, and is, considered a war crime under intermational military law. The document, incriminating as it appears to be, doesn't constitute trefunble 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 Angelt Times, and U.S. News & World Réport) that could have published this document has 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 Kayangel Lagoon, in the Palau Islands of the South Pacific, was Bush's first solo combar "sull" Forry-eight years later, in a sruggle for re-election, Bush would make his wartime exploits a campiagn issue. Seiting on the controversy surrounding Bill Clinton's opposition to the Viernam 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 foderal researcher who, in early 1991, Inal 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 monthis later, however, he decided the public should know about the report. He lived fur from the media centers of New York and Washington and knew no reporters, but he became acquainted with Paula Ogburn, a freshance writer in Orange Courny, Callorina. 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. "VI" refers to Bush's squadron, which included Bush's plane and a second bomber, piloted by L.R. R. Hoale. But did both Bush and Houle strafe lifeboars? Was "VI" singular or plural? U.S. Nawy 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 to gether in such circumstunces. Moreover, three sentences earlier, "VI" 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 lifeboars.



The name "Ens. 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 rulen in by a political dirry-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 Sush's plane was involved in the straflug," explains U.S. News & World "-yort editor Lee Rainie. The document was interesting but "not a self-fulfilling story," recalls editor Roger Smith of the Los Angles! Times. Newseek, which pursued the story the furthers, even going to the trouble of tying to track down autrivors in Japan, ultimately decided, in the words of Washington bursue whiel Evan Thomas. There were too many other possible explanations." Off-the-record interviews with White House sources can't doubt on the credibility of the evidence," adds Neusseek's thief of correspondents, Ann McDaniel.

The accom; anying fighter planes (VF) also filed their own aircraft action report, but that document neither confirms nor contradicts the lifeboar strafing reported here. It simply doesn't mention it—hardly surprising, given the lifeboar strafing reported here. It simply doesn't mention it—hardly surprising, given the lilegality of such an act. The turrer gunner in Houle's bomber, Charles Y. Brimm, says he doesn't recall any strafing but says, "It may have happened," and he agrees that the best way to clear up the question is simply to sak Baah what happened and to publish the document with his response. Such an approach apparently idin't occur to the high-powered journalists whose deference and self-censorship silenced this story. Popular mythology craves sinister explanations—threatening calls from the Cval Office—when the media don't cru a politically damaging story. The truth is more insidious. "If the same kind of document had surfaced implicating the prime minister of Japan in a war crime, American Journalists would have gone to rown on it." agrees MTI historian John Dower, whose book, War Without Mercy, documented the systematic strafing of Japanese lifeboats by American and Australian forces during the Bartle of the Bimarck Sea in 1943. Paula Ogburn's unwriting mistake lay in not recognizing that American journalists would aid 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 Vomiani Shimhan or Paris's Le Monde or London's Independent—news organizations whose judgment is unclouded by misplaced American fears and loyalites. As for George Bush's respor-se to what happened on July ZS, 1941 I provided his Houston office with a copy of this document.

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