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Flier avoided battle but favoritism denied**SOURCE:** Austin Bureau of The Dallas Morning News**BYLINE:** Pete Slover, George Kuempel**DATELINE:** AUSTIN**BODY:**

AUSTIN - With the Vietnam War raging, 21-year-old George W. Bush wanted to join the Texas Air National Guard in 1968. He offered no aviation experience but cited his work as a ranch hand, oil field "roustabout" and sporting goods salesman.

He passed the written test required for pilot trainees. Among the results: He showed below-average potential as a would-be flier but scored high as a future leader.

Although Mr. Bush's unit in Texas had a waiting list for many spots, he was accepted because he was one of a handful of applicants willing and qualified to spend more than a year in active training, and extra shifts after training, flying single-seat F-102 fighter jets.

Once he was in, Guard officials sought to capitalize on his standing as the son of a congressman.

A 1970 Guard news release featured Mr. Bush as "one member of our younger generation who doesn't get his kicks from pot or hashish or speed.

"On, he gets high, all right, but not from narcotics," it said.

"Fighters are it," Mr. Bush is quoted as saying. "I've always wanted to be a fighter pilot, and I wouldn't want to fly anything else."

Such are the details that emerge from a review of Mr. Bush's service record by The Dallas Morning News, along with interviews with Guard leaders, former colleagues and state officials familiar with that unit.

Mr. Bush, 52, now the Republican front-runner for president, has repeatedly denied suggestions by political rivals that he received preferential treatment to get into the Guard - widely seen as a haven from which enlistees were unlikely to be shipped to Vietnam.

As evidence he wasn't dodging combat, Mr. Bush has pointed to his efforts to try to volunteer for a program that rotated Guard pilots to Vietnam, although he wasn't called.

"There was no special treatment," he said.

Mr. Bush said he took flying seriously. "You will die in your airplane if you didn't practice, and I wasn't interested in dying," he said.

Records provided to The News by Tom Hail, a historian for the Texas Air National Guard, show that the unit Mr. Bush signed up for was not filled. In mid-1968, the 147th Fighter Interceptor Group, based in Houston, had 156 openings

among its authorized staff of 925 military personnel.

Of those, 26 openings were for officer slots, such as that filled by Mr. Bush, and 130 were for enlisted men and women. Also, several former Air Force pilots who served in the unit said that they were recruited from elsewhere to fly for the Texas Guard.

Officers who supervised Mr. Bush and approved his admission to the Guard said they were never contacted by anyone on Mr. Bush's behalf.

"He didn't have any strings pulled, because there weren't any strings to pull," said Leroy Thompson of Brownwood, who commanded the squadron that kept the waiting list for the guard at Ellington Air Force Base. "Our practices were under incredible scrutiny then. It was a very ticklish time."

Fellow members of the Bush unit said they knew of his background.

U.S. Rep. George Bush was at his son's side when he was made an officer in the Guard. The elder Mr. Bush, a former World War II pilot, later spoke at his son's graduation from flight school.

David Hanifl of La Crescent, Minn., an Air Force regular who went through pilot training in Georgia with George W. Bush, said the flight instructors were eager to fly with the Texan.

"He didn't get any preferential treatment, but some of the instructors liked the idea of scheduling him to fly with them because of his connections," he said.

Mr. Hanifl said it was somewhat unusual for a Guardsman to be included in the flight class with Air Force regulars.

"You had to have clout to get that type of assignment," he said. He added that Mr. Bush was a good pilot and did not seek any favors.

Also getting into the Bush unit in 1968 was Lloyd Bentsen III, a recent graduate of Stanford University business school whose father was a former congressman later elected Democratic U.S. senator from Texas.

The waiting list

According to several former officers, the openings in the unit were filled from a waiting list kept in the base safe of Rufus G. Martin, then an Air National Guard personnel officer.

In a recent interview, Mr. Martin of San Antonio said the list was kept on computer and in a bound volume, which was periodically inspected by outside agencies to make sure the list was kept properly.

Mr. Bush said he sought the Guard position on his own, before graduating from Yale University in 1968. He personally met with Col. Walter B. Staudt, commander of the 147th group.

In an interview, Mr. Bush said he walked into Col. Staudt's Houston office and told him he wanted to be a fighter pilot.

"He told me they were looking for pilots," Mr. Bush said. He said he was told that there were five or six flying slots available, and he got one of them.

While Guard slots generally were coveted, pilot positions required superior education, physical fitness and the willingness to spend more than a year in full-time training.

"If somebody like that came along, you'd snatch them up," said the former commander, who retired as a general. "He took no advantage. It wouldn't have made any difference whether his daddy was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

Bobby Hodges, the group's operations officer, and others familiar with Guard rules said Mr. Bush made it to the top of the short list of candidates who could pass both the written officer test and a rigorous flight physical to qualify for the three to four annual pilot training "quotas" allotted to the unit.

Mr. Hodges and Gen. Staudt are the two surviving members of the military panel that reviewed and approved Mr. Bush's officer commission.

Most of those wanting to get into the Guard at that time, they said, didn't want to put in the full year of active service that was required to become a pilot.

Pilot aptitude test

Records from his military file show that in January 1968, after inquiring about Guard admission, Mr. Bush went to an Air Force recruiting office near Yale, where he took and passed the test required by the Air Force for pilot trainees. His score on the pilot aptitude section, one of five on the test, was in the 25th percentile, the lowest allowed for would-be fliers.

Ralph J. Ianuzzi, a newly minted Air Force captain, supervised administration of the test and signed Mr. Bush's score sheet, an event of which he had no recollection.

The pilot portion of the exam included tasks such as identifying the angle of a plane in flight after being shown the view from the cockpit and figuring out which way a gear in a machine would turn in response to another gear's being turned.

"That score for pilot seems low. I made that, and I'm dyslexic," Mr. Ianuzzi, a retired FBI agent who never earned his wings but said it was significant that Mr. Bush did. "He passed the most important test. He flew the plane."

On the "officer quality section," designed to measure intangible traits such as leadership, Mr. Bush scored better than 95 percent of those taking the test.

It's impossible to compare Mr. Bush's score on the test to scores of other pilot candidates, because Air Force historians say no records survive of average scores for those accepted to pilot training.

Pilot training

After completing basic training in San Antonio in August 1968, he helped out aircraft mechanics at Ellington until that November, when a pilot-training slot came open.

He was promoted to second lieutenant and began a 13-month pilot training program at Moody Air Force Base, in Georgia.

He was the only Guardsman among the 70 or so officers from other branches of the military who began the training.

Under the terms of his contract with the military, if Mr. Bush had failed to complete pilot school, he would have been required to serve the Guard in some other capacity, to enter the draft, or to enlist in another branch of the military.

After passing flight training, Mr. Bush was schooled for several more months at Ellington, and in March 1970 began flying "alerts," the name used to describe the 147th's mission of guarding gulf coast borders against foreign attack.

In those days, just five years after the Cuban missile crisis, the 147th kept at least two fighters ready to scramble, round-the-clock, guarding Texas oil fields and refineries against airstrikes.

"It's kind of a non-threatening way to do your military, get paid well for some long shifts, and feel good about your own involvement," said Douglas W. Solberg, now an airline pilot, offering his reasons for joining the 147th and serving with Mr. Bush after an Air Force flying stint. "It was a cushy way to be a patriot."

A former non-commissioned officer who worked on planes and supervised other ground crews at Ellington said Mr. Bush was not a silver-spoon snob or elitist, unlike some former Air Force fliers.

"I remember him coming down, kicking the tires, washing the windows, whatever," said Joe H. Briggs, now of Houston. "I'm probably one of the few people around who'll admit I voted for Clinton. But I'll pull for this guy for president."

No overseas duty

Mr. Bush's application for the Guard included a box to be checked specifying whether he did or did not volunteer for overseas duty. His includes a check mark in the box not wanting to volunteer for such an assignment.

But several personnel officers said that part of the application for domestic Guard units routinely would be filled out that way by a clerk typist, then given to the applicant to sign.

Mr. Bush has said that he signed up for but lacked the number of flying hours to participate in a program called the Palace Alert, which eventually rotated nine pilots from his unit into duty in Southeast Asia from 1969 to 1970.

His sign-up and willingness to participate was confirmed by several of his colleagues and superiors, who remembered the effort as brash but admirable.

"The more experienced pilots were shaking their heads, saying, 'He doesn't even know where to park the planes,' " said Albert C. Lloyd, then head of personnel for the Texas Air National Guard.

Some attention has also focused on Mr. Bush's departure from the service. Under his original oath, he was obligated to serve in the Guard until May 1974. Instead, he was allowed to leave in October 1973 to attend Harvard Business School.

Former Guard officials and members of Mr. Bush's unit said that release, seven months early, was not unusual for the Guard. Mr. Bush's unit was changing airplanes at the time, from the single-seat F-102 to the dual-seat F-101. They said it made little sense to retrain him for just a few months' service, and letting him go freed spots for the Guard to recruit F-101 pilots from the Air Force and elsewhere.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S): (Agence France-Presse file photo) U.S. Rep. George Bush pinned bars on son George W. as he became a second lieutenant in the Texas Air National Guard.

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