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Bush & the Air Guard

ALAN J. MEESE

AT 8:46 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, American Airlines Flight 11 struck the north tower of the World Trade Center. At the same time, two F-15 fighters were ordered to intercept United Flight 175, then speeding toward the south tower. In six minutes the planes were aloft, manned by National Guard pilots. They arrived eight minutes late.

Before 9/11, the Air Guard was America's sole homeland air defense, and only Guard fighters scrambled that day. F-16s from North Dakota training in Virginia scrambled just before terrorists struck the Pentagon. Their orders: "Protect the White House at all costs."

F-16s from the Texas Guard escorted Air Force One to Offutt Airbase in Nebraska and back to Washington. Other Guard units helped the FAA clear civilian planes from the sky.

The F-16s that accompanied the commander-in-chief that day were from the same unit — the 111th fighter/interceptor squadron — that President Bush joined in 1968. George W. Bush's service with that unit is now under intense election-year scrutiny, with some claiming that Guard duty was risk-free and unrelated to national defense.

John Kerry, who served four months on a Navy patrol boat in Vietnam, seemed to compare Guard

service with "going to Canada" or illegally resisting the draft and "going to jail," saying he "had never made any judgments about "these choices people make." Terry McAuliffe, the chairman of Kerry's party, claimed the president "never served in the military, or [served] our country."

Those who disparage service in the Guard are dead wrong. Like the pilots who scrambled on 9/11, Guard pilots have played a major role in America's defense since the Air Guard's birth in 1947.

During the Korean War, 66 Guard squadrons were mobilized. Six, including the 111th, saw combat. Guard warplanes flew 39,530 sorties and dropped 44,000 bombs; 101 Guardsmen were lost — killed or MIA. Four Guard pilots, including one from the 111th, became aces by shooting down at least five enemy planes.

In 1961, President Kennedy activated 18 squadrons of Guard combat aircraft and deployed 11 to Europe, countering the Soviets in Berlin. At the Cold War's height, hundreds of Soviet bombers carrying hydrogen bombs threatened the United States. More than 1,000 fighters, many on five-minute alert, were ready to meet them, including planes from 25 Guard squadrons.

Thus, Bush volunteered on May 27, 1968 for a Guard that had seen combat in the nation's last war and still played an important role in its defense.

Before Bush enlisted, President Johnson mobilized several Guard fighter squadrons and ordered four to Vietnam. They arrived on May 3. A fifth "Air Force" squadron was actually 85 percent Guardsmen. Together, these planes flew 30,000 sorties and logged 50,000 combat hours. Several support units also saw duty there.

That summer, Johnson sent two Guard fighter squadrons to Korea, withdrawing them when the North released the crew of the U.S.S. Pueblo, which had been seized in January.

No one who entered the Air Guard in 1968 could know what course events

for pilot school.

Instead, Bush chose what was probably the quickest route to the cockpit. In the Guard, he spent 21 months on active duty, much of it training to fly F-102 "Delta Daggers." A supersonic fighter, the Dagger carried air-to-air missiles, sometimes with atomic warheads. Initially designed to intercept Soviet bombers, F-102s escorted B-52s over North Vietnam and protected airbases. While Air Force pilots often manned the plans, Guard pilots also participated under operation "Palace Alert."

When Bush, whom one instructor ranked "among the top 5 percent of pilots [he'd] ever trained," asked about volunteering for

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in Vietnam or elsewhere would take. Would Johnson further escalate the war? Would he heed some military advisers and mobilize more Guard units? Did North Korea's attack on the Pueblo, an act of war, signal a new conflict that would involve more Guard squadrons? What about hot spots like Cuba? Would Soviet bombers target the United States?

Bush could have joined the Army or Marines and volunteered for infantry combat in the jungles of Vietnam. He could have served as an Army journalist, like Al Gore. He could have joined the Air Force and undergone lengthy officer candidate training, hoping to qualify

Palace Alert, he was told to accumulate more flying time first. Before he could, the Air Force eliminated the program and withdrew F-102s from Vietnam. Training complete, Bush remained on active duty, sometimes manning five-minute alerts.

Many let their deeds speak for themselves, though some try to minimize the contributions of others. While some of his generation were doing their best to avoid service — any service — President Bush answered the call. He served, with honor, and so did the Guard.

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Kerry taking a stand: Ex-Navy Lt. and Vietnam Veterans Against the War activist John Kerry, 27, testifying before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington, April 22, 1971. Antiwar demonstrators applaud from the rear. AP