Honorable Service

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Repository Citation
https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular_media/343
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.

The next 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 in Vietnam or elsewhere would take. Would Johnson further escalate the war? Would he heed some military advisers and mobilize more Guard squadrons? 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 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 Daggers 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 planes, 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 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.