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George magazine used fuzzy math, doctored and misrepresented documents to defend Bush's military record

By Martin Heldt

October 22, 2000—The reporters of the George magazine article about George W. Bush's Air National Guard service took me to task for one of my Online Journal articles because I did not mention "... that Guardsmen needed to accumulate 50 points a year to maintain their standing."

Then the George magazine author said that I was "incorrect" when I said that Bush did not have enough points to make up for both the missing year and the last year of Bush's active service.

Upon looking at the evidence I saw that the author, Peter Keating, had a few problems with his article.

First, the records for 1973-1974 are fairly clear and contain some information that clarifies what we need to look for.

KEATING: Ultimately, he racked up 19 active duty points of service and 16 inactive duty points by July 30-which, added to his 15 gratuitous points, achieved the requisite total of 50 for the year ending in May 1974.

But the documentation does not support Keating's statement. Take a look at Keating's own supporting document < <http://www2.georgemag.com/images/documents/doc13.gif>>. Yes, there are a total of 35 points of active/inactive duty as Keating says, but Keating claims 15 gratuitous points for this document. This document, though, does not support him.

Look at the bottom of Keating's document under the letter "D." This letter is used by the Guard to indicate the number of gratuitous days awarded. The number shown is 5.

Could it be that the document is not clear?

No, because just a little further to the right under "E" is the total of the points for the year and that number is 40.

If Keating's document isn't clear enough as to Bush's totals for the year, then there is the ARF Retirement Credit Summary of 30 January 1974 < http://www.cis.net/~coldfeet/points_breakdown.gif>. This document is also one of service and shows a legend for the letter code used to breakdown the points at the bottom of the page.

On this document Keating ignored the facts -- as presented on the available document-- and went with the supposition that all Guardsmen automatically received 15 gratuitous points. He was wrong.

Mr. Keating again took my Online Journal piece to task and pointed out that I "did not discuss the 1972-73 points earned by Bush, nor the 15 'gratuitous' points that the Guard granted its members each year."

Here is the document < <http://www.cis.net/~coldfeet/doc99.gif>> that Keating claims I should be discussing points for.

As documents go, this one has a troubled soul. It was found nearly two years ago by Al Lloyd while he was working for Governor Bush. Somehow the document then made its way into the national records.

But there are other troubles besides the chain of custody problem with this document -- it has only the initial W to give it a name, it has no years and only the letter N is visible to indicate a month. A further problem is that there is no breakdown of the way the points were awarded at the bottom of the page as we can see in the 1973-1974 documents.

This last point is very odd indeed for the place where those points should be broken down is clearly visible (Look at the bottom, under the capital letters).

Keating may have used fuzzy math in his claims of 15 "gratuitous" points for 1973-74, but he uses a new tact with this document < <http://www2.georgemag.com/images/documents/doc13a.gif>> to grant 15 points for the 1972-73 year. [Note, this is the same undated, no-name document as I have, only with some additions having been made at a later date]

A critical fact to keep in mind is that these gratuitous points are given based on how much service was done for the year. Fifteen gratuitous points were not a given. That was just the maximum number that could be awarded for a full year's service. And we saw that quite clearly spelled out on the 1973-74 document in which only five gratuitous points were given to Bush for his short year of service.

And, just as in 1973-74, Bush had a short year in 1972-73. And George magazine's reporters show that Bush had missed 7 months of service by the time Keating first placed him on duty on November 29, 1972. At the most -- and if the document belongs to Bush -- there were only enough months served to qualify for 6-7 gratuitous points.

But we'll never know, as the official document does not record the breakdown.

As I mentioned, Keating's document has some additions made to it after it was released from the official archives. By whom we don't know, as Keating is keeping that evidence from us.

This might not be so bad if, as Keating states, "Purely for purposes of legibility, we posted a copy that did not come from that set and that had some handwriting on it on our Web site. But the handwritten notes do not alter the substance of the page: that Bush accumulated 41 points of service over the span recorded, which, when added to his 15 'gratuitous' points, was enough to keep him in good standing with the Guard."

But, the handwritten notes clearly add 15 points to the document and that is a matter of substance.

Keating and co-author Kartik Thyagarajan chose twice to overlook the direct evidence of their documents. And then submitted to the public a document obtained outside of official channels, which had substantive additions, such as dating, points breakdowns and the awarding of additional points -- without informing their readers.

Leaps of faith, bad math, doctored and misrepresented documents...what worse could you ask for in a work of journalism?

Maybe a smear piece by Salon?