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NASSAU AND SUFFOLK EDITION**SECTION:** OPINION; Pg. A41**LENGTH:** 669 words**HEADLINE:** GOP smears Kerry's war record**BYLINE:** Marie Cocco. Marie Cocco is a nationally syndicated columnist and member of Newsday's editorial board.**BODY:**

How much shrapnel did George W. Bush take?

We've had quite a debate over the amount of shrapnel that found its way into John Kerry's body parts during his service in Vietnam. The answer, as revealed by the Democratic presidential challenger's release of military and medical records, is enough to have earned him the three Purple Hearts he was awarded by the only authority with the legitimacy to judge. That is, the United States Navy.

Still, it seems the fog machine is winning. It's winning because the goal of the Republican spinmeisters and the conservative talksters and the Internet gossipmongers and the cable-TV co-conspirators is not to uncover facts to seriously challenge that which cannot legitimately be challenged.

The point is to muddy things up. The purpose is to undermine the public's sense of Kerry's character, to create a caricature of Kerry as a fraud. They know that in politics, inchoate - and illegitimate - fear is more powerful than fact.

The brouhaha started when the Boston Globe quoted one of Kerry's former commanders, Grant Hibbard, as questioning the severity of the shrapnel wound that led to Kerry's first Purple Heart. The right-wing echo chamber took it from there. The clamor reached crescendo when Ed Gillespie, chairman of the Republican National Committee, made a speech in Ohio and called upon Kerry to release military records from 1966 to 1978, including attendance records and - pointedly - official evaluations by his superior officers.

Gillespie, in an interview later, said he was satisfied with the disclosure. And those evaluations he was so deeply concerned with seeing? He said he hasn't read them.

"I don't care about his records," Gillespie said. He only wanted Kerry to make good on his promise to release them.

Here, for Gillespie or anyone else concerned about records they don't bother to read, are the evaluations: Hibbard at the time did not give a written evaluation of Kerry, saying he'd commanded him for too short a time - half a month, according to the documents. Hibbard nonetheless completed a checklist rating Kerry's initiative, cooperation and bearing as among the top few.

Other evaluations range from excellent to extraordinary. "A top notch officer in every measureable trait," Capt. Allen W. Slifer wrote of Kerry's stint aboard the USS Gridley in 1967, before Kerry went on to command his own swift boats in Vietnam. "ENS Kerry is one of the finest young officers I have ever met, and without question one of the most promising."

In December 1969 Lt. Cmdr. George Elliott wrote: "In a combat environment often requiring independent, decisive action, LTJG Kerry was unsurpassed." The official accounts of actions Kerry took to be honored with the Silver Star and Bronze Star jibe with those long ago recorded in Kerry's political biography. He is cited for valor, for heroic achievement, for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action."

The debate over the caliber of Kerry's service in Vietnam is phony. It is as false as that doctored picture that turned up a few months ago on the Internet. It supposedly showed Kerry sharing a microphone with Jane Fonda during a 1971 anti-

war rally on Long Island. Kerry was there. Fonda wasn't. The faked photo was a figment of the right-wing imagination.

So where is George? His political henchmen have a fine little cottage industry that hums along, attacking Kerry not only for his anti-war activities, but for his war wounds. With his silence the president condones this.

Bush never saw combat during his Vietnam-era service in the Texas Air National Guard. His own records show unexplained gaps in service. Now that we know shrapnel remains lodged in his opponent's thigh, will Bush finally explain why he missed that required physical - and so was barred from flying?

Will the commander-in-chief declare a truce in this ugly firefight? Probably not. Bush must be concerned he cannot win on his own record. He's got to allow the smearing of someone else's instead.

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