



JEFFREY KLEIN



McCain's Secret, Questionable Record

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"At a meeting in his Pentagon office in early 1981, Secretary of the Navy John F. Lehman told Capt. John S. McCain III that he was about to attain his life ambition: becoming an admiral.... Mr. McCain declined the prospect of his first admiral's star to make a run for Congress, saying that he could 'do more good there,' Mr. Lehman recalled." So [claimed the *New York Times*](#) in a front-page article on May 29 this year.

This story is highly improbable for several reasons, not least of all because John McCain himself has always told a very different story about his stalled naval career. For example, on page 9 of his memoir *Worth The Fighting For*, McCain writes:

"Several months before my father died, I informed him that I was leaving the navy. I am sure he had gotten word of my decision from friends in the Pentagon. I had been summoned to see the CNO, Admiral Heyward, who told me I was making a mistake.... His attempt to dissuade me encouraged me to believe that I might have made admiral had I remained in the navy, a prospect that remained an open question in my mind.... Some of my navy friends believed I could earn my star; others doubted it.... When I told my father of my intention, he did not remonstrate me.... But I knew him well enough to know that he was disappointed. For when I left him that day, alone in his study, I took with me his hope that I might someday become the first son and grandson of four-star admirals to achieve the same distinction. That aspiration was well beyond my reach by the time I made my decision...."

McCain's father died on March 22, 1981. McCain retired from the Navy within a week. He wrote about his retirement soon thereafter. McCain never mentioned the alleged offer of an admiralship by Lehman in any of his books, nor in the numerous interviews McCain gave during his first run for the presidency in 1999-2000.

Furthermore, articles written during the current presidential campaign quote McCain's closest friends about McCain's failure to be promoted to admiral before he retired from the Navy. For example, in an April 26, 2008, *National Journal* [cover story](#), William Cohen (then a Senator, subsequently Secretary of Defense and the best man at McCain's second wedding) recounts that McCain "knew his career in the Navy was limited." Former Senator Gary Hart, who served as a groomsman at McCain's 1980 wedding, says in the *National Journal* story that he had been told "that [McCain] was not going to receive a star

and not going to become an admiral. I think that was the deciding point for him to retire from the Navy."

John Lehman doesn't figure in any accounts of McCain's naval career, probably because Lehman was appointed Secretary of the Navy less than two months before McCain retired. The *New York Times* didn't note this, or the pertinent fact that John Lehman is currently serving as National Security Adviser to McCain's 2008 presidential campaign. Two admirals in the *Times* story confirmed Lehman's claim, but for unknown reasons the *Times*, in violation of its own guidelines, accorded them off-the-record status that makes it impossible to assess their motives and credibility.

The *New York Times'* front-page story about McCain declining promotion to admiral lacks credibility for other reasons as well. For example, McCain had been promoted to captain on August 1, 1979, so he wouldn't have been due for another promotion by March of 1981.

Retired Admiral Peter Booth, who was promoted to rear admiral in 1981, flatly disputes Lehman's claim about McCain. "No, John McCain was not selected for flag rank, for admiral. With all due respect, I think I was selected that same year, and I have never heard anything even remotely like that. To begin with, John Lehman did not select Navy flag officers. That was done with a very august selection board headed by a four-star admiral. The Secretary of the Navy does not appoint. He is in the approval chain, but he is not on the committee.

"I have never heard a story, even remotely, that John McCain was going to be a flag officer. I was early selected for captain, in 1976, and I was regular selected for admiral in 1981. So it's probably five or six years, I guess. I've never heard of anybody being selected for flag rank within three or four years of making captain, ever."

Retired Admiral John R. Batzler, former commanding officer of the U.S.S. Nimitz, also promoted to rear admiral in 1981, agrees with Retired Admiral Booth.

"I made rear admiral in about five years. I wasn't selected early, and I wasn't selected late. I find it incredible that someone made that statement that John Lehman told John McCain he was going to be promoted to admiral two years after he made captain. First of all, telling him at all is not kosher, but we all know the Secretary of the Navy does what he damn well pleases, in particular John Lehman. This whole idea that John Lehman told John McCain he was going to be promoted to flag two years after he made captain sounds preposterous to me."

All of the evidence, indications and comments that the *New York Times* published a flattering lie about McCain's career on its front page are easy for John McCain to refute. All he needs to do is sign Standard Form 180, which authorizes the Navy to send an undeleted copy of McCain's naval file to news organizations. A long paper trail about McCain's pending promotion to admiral would be prominent in his file. To date, McCain's advisers have released snippets from his file, but under constrained viewing circumstances. There's no reason McCain's full file shouldn't be released immediately. In June 2005, seven months after he lost his bid for president, Senator John Kerry signed the 180 waiver, authorizing the release of his complete military service record to the Boston Globe, the Los Angeles Times, and the

Associated Press. ** Unlike Kerry, McCain shouldn't wait until after the election to do so.

The Navy may claim that it already released McCain's record to the Associated Press on May 7, 2008 in response to the AP's Freedom of Information Act request. But the McCain file the Navy released contained 19 pages -- a two-page overview and 17 pages detailing Awards and Decorations. Each of these 17 pages is stamped with a number. These numbers range from 0069 to 0636. When arranged in ascending order, they precisely track the chronology of McCain's career. It seems reasonable to ask the Navy whether there are at least 636 pages in McCain's file, of which 617 weren't released to the Associated Press.

Some of the unreleased pages in McCain's Navy file may not reflect well upon his qualifications for the presidency. From day one in the Navy, McCain screwed-up again and again, only to be forgiven because his father and grandfather were four-star admirals. McCain's sense of entitlement to privileged treatment bears an eerie resemblance to George W. Bush's.

Despite graduating in the bottom 1 percent of his Annapolis class, McCain was offered the most sought-after Navy assignment -- to become an aircraft carrier pilot. According to military historian John Karaagac, "the Airdales,' the air wing of the Navy, acted and still do, as if unrivaled atop the naval pyramid. They acted as if they owned, not only the Navy, but the entire swath of blue water on the earth's surface." The most accomplished midshipmen compete furiously for the few carrier pilot openings. After four abysmal academic years at Annapolis distinguished only by his misdeeds and malfeasance, no one with a record resembling McCain's would have been offered such a prized career path. The justification for this and subsequent plum assignments should be documented in McCain's naval file.

McCain's file should also include records and analytic reviews of McCain's subsequent sub-par performances. Here are a few cited in two highly favorable biographies, both titled *John McCain*, one by Robert Timberg and the other by John Karaagac.

Timberg:

"[A]fter a European fling with the tobacco heiress, John McCain reported to flight school at Pensacola in August 1958.... [H]is performance was below par, at best good enough to get by. He liked flying, but didn't love it. What he loved was the kick-the-tire, start-the-fire, scarf-in-the-wind life of a naval aviator. ...One Saturday morning, as McCain was practicing landings, his engine quit and his plane plunged into Corpus Christi. Knocked unconscious by the impact, he came to as the plane settled to the bottom....McCain was an adequate pilot, but he had no patience for studying dry aviation manuals.... His professional growth, though reasonably steady, had its troubled moments. Flying too low over the Iberian Peninsula, he took out some power lines, which led to a spate of newspaper stories in which he was predictably identified as the son of an admiral.... [In 1965] he flew a trainer solo to Philadelphia for the Army-Navy game. Flying by way of Norfolk, he had just begun his descent over unpopulated tidal terrain when the engine died. 'I've got a flameout,' he radioed. He went through the standard relight procedures three times. At one thousand feet he ejected, landing on the deserted beach moments before the plane slammed into a clump of trees."

Adds Karaagac:

"In his memoir, everything becomes a kind of game of adolescent brinksmanship, how much can one press the limits of the acceptable and elude the powers that be....The [fighter jocks'] ethos of exaggerated, almost aggressive sociability becomes an end in itself and an excuse for license. There is a tendency for people, not simply to believe their own mythology but, indeed, to exaggerate it.... Fighter jocks, like politicians around their campaign contributions, often press the limits of the acceptable. It is a type of mild corruption that takes place in a highly privileged atmosphere, where restraints are loosened and excuses made....McCain gives some hint in his memoirs about where he stood in the hierarchy among carrier flyers. Instead of the sleek and newer Phantoms and Crusaders, McCain flew the dependable Douglas A-4 Skyhawk in an attack, not a fighter squadron. He was thus on the lower end of the flying totem pole."

The genius of McCain's mythmaking is his perceived humility amid perpetual defiance. Having been a rebel without cause, and often a rebel without consequences, McCain apparently was not surprised when his Vietnamese captors went relatively easy on him compared to his fellow POWs. The Vietnamese military secretly and frequently filmed the American POWs to learn their propensities. Col. Pham Van Hoa of the Vietnamese People's Army Film Department was in charge of the filming. Asked recently for his dominant impression of McCain, the now-retired Van Hoa said that McCain "seemed superior to other prisoners." How so? "Superior in attitude towards them."

But when Mark Salter, McCain's closest aide and co-author, was asked by the *Arizona New Times* about the first McCain memoir, *Faith of My Fathers*, that he was then working on, Salter said "the book will showcase a humble McCain. When I worked on this book with him, he just kept saying, 'Other guys had it a lot worse. I think they took it easier on me because of who my dad was. . . . When they tied me in ropes, they'd roll my sleeve up to give it a little padding between the rope and my bicep, you know, little things I noticed. The only really hard time I had was when I didn't go home, and then it only lasted a week, and sometimes I felt braver, I felt I could get away with more.'"

Is McCain now getting away with more by hiding his official history and by having his national security adviser inflate McCain's resume with a bogus promotion to admiral humbly declined? If so, McCain may be attempting to hide why the Navy was in fact slow to promote him upwards despite his suffering as a POW and his distinguished naval heritage.

One possible reason: After McCain had returned from Vietnam as a war hero and was physically rehabilitated, he was urged by his medical caretakers and military colleagues never to fly again. But McCain insisted on going up. As Carl Bernstein [reported](#) in *Vanity Fair*, he piloted an ultra-light, single propeller plane -- and crashed another time. His fifth loss of a plane has vanished from public records, but should be a subject of discussion in his Navy file. It wouldn't be surprising if his naval superiors worried that McCain was just too defiant, too reckless and too crash prone.

Regardless, McCain owes it to the country to release his complete naval records so that American voters can see his documented history and make an informed decision.

** *An earlier version of this story may have left the impression that John Kerry had signed the 180 military waiver during the 2004 presidential campaign. It has been updated to clarify the timing of the*

release.

Jeffrey Klein is an investigative journalist who co-founded Mother Jones; directed exposes of Newt Gingrich, Big Tobacco and the introduction of offensive weapons into space; co-produced for The News Hour with Jim Lehrer a series on China's economy that won a Gerald Loeb Award; and taught journalism at Stanford, San Francisco State and Cal. He is currently reporting on assignment for the [Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute](#), which provided research support for this article. Research assistance was provided by Peter Jackson.