

# A “Lost” Fact in the “Rathergate” Mess – Part 1

☒ What seems like a long, long time ago Dan Rather was a very powerful force in American journalism. He not only was the anchorman of the CBS Evening News, he was also *the* face of the network’s renowned news division – the “Tiffany” network of bigger-than-life legends like Ed Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Eric Sevareid, Mike Wallace and many, many others.

That was then. Now Dan Rather is suing the network that employed him for 44 years, asking for \$70 million dollars in damages. Technically, the lawsuit is about a dry legal issue – breach of contract. But it is also about something much more personal to Rather: his legacy. It is a lawsuit, fundamentally, about saving Dan Rather’s reputation.

That reputation took a turn for the worse back in 2004. As has been widely reported, just 55 days before a very close presidential election, Dan Rather and his producer Mary Mapes put a story on the weekday edition of 60 Minutes that brought on the media equivalent of World War III. There were accusations that Rather, Mapes, and maybe the entire CBS News Division had set out to deliberately destroy George W. Bush and get John Kerry elected President of the United States – a charge everyone at CBS vehemently denies.

The story was about how the young George Bush got preferential treatment during the Vietnam War; how he wangled his way into the Texas Air National Guard back in the 1960s to avoid service in Vietnam; and how he was able to do it because his father was a big-shot, a United States Congressman from Houston. The story portrayed the Bush as a slacker. Others have said it portrayed him as a “cowardly draft dodger.”

And to bolster their story, Rather and Mapes got their hands

on “never-before-seen” documents (as Rather put it in his story) that supposedly backed up their months (and in Mapes’ case, years) of reporting. But in no time flat the documents came under attack, mainly by conservatives on the web who examined the typeface of the memos and concluded they were fakes.

CBS News management aggressively defended the story in general and the documents in particular – until they didn’t. After about two weeks, CBS threw in the towel and said it could no longer stand by the story. Rather, who had been vigorously defending his story, reluctantly went on the air and admitted the documents could not be authenticated. Later he would say he was forced to do it.

In the aftermath of the fiasco, CBS established an outside panel to look into the matter. In January of 2005 the panel issued a report which concluded the news division failed to establish that the documents were legitimate and not bogus. Mapes was fired. A vice president and two producers were forced to resign. And Dan Rather was a dead man walking.

He had already lost his job as anchorman of the evening news but was allowed to stay on the weekday edition of 60 Minutes, which his story had sent on a glide path to oblivion. And when that show died an inglorious death Rather went over to the Sunday edition of 60 Minutes. But that wouldn’t last long, either. When his contract ran out CBS yanked him off the show, but made him an offer he decided to refuse: Rather would get an office and an assistant and he could report stories for any CBS News broadcast that called on him – if any CBS News broadcast ever chose to call on him. CBS offered Rather \$250,000 a year, according to my sources, who say he wanted a million. When he didn’t get it, he quit. According to Rather, he was pushed out the door by the head of CBS, Leslie Moonves.

In 2007, Rather filed his \$70 million lawsuit against his old

company saying he wasn't allowed to defend his story because the top management of CBS' parent company, Viacom, wanted to appease the Bush Administration and protect its business interests.

Until now, the controversy over the Rather/Mapes story has centered almost entirely on one issue: the legitimacy of the documents – a very important issue, indeed. But it turns out that there was another very important issue, one that goes to the very heart of what the story was about – and one that has gone virtually unnoticed. This is it: ***Mary Mapes knew before she put the story on the air that George W. Bush, the alleged slacker, had in fact volunteered to go to Vietnam.***

Who says? The outside panel CBS brought into to get to the bottom of the so-called "Rathergate" mess says. I recently re-examined the panel's report after a source, Deep Throat style, told me to "Go to page 130." When I did, here's the startling piece of information I found:

**Mapes had information prior to the airing of the September 8 [2004] Segment that President Bush, while in the TexANG [Texas Air National Guard] did volunteer for service in Vietnam but was turned down in favor of more experienced pilots. For example, a flight instructor who served in the TexANG with Lieutenant Bush advised Mapes in 1999 that Lieutenant Bush "did want to go to Vietnam but others went first." Similarly, several others advised Mapes in 1999, and again in 2004 before September 8, that Lieutenant Bush had volunteered to go to Vietnam but did not have enough flight hours to qualify.**

This information, despite the fact that it has been available since the CBS report came out four years ago, has remained a secret to almost everybody both in and out of the media – one lonely fact in a 234- page report loaded with thousands of facts, and overshadowed by the controversy surrounding the documents.

I made an online check and discovered that while a few websites noted the CBS finding, the story got no ink (that I could find) on the news pages of any big mainstream paper. I did manage to find two *opinion* pieces about the CBS mess – one in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, the other in the Miami Herald – that briefly, and only in passing, mentioned the “Bush volunteered” angle. But that was it! A check of network newscasts turned up nothing. And when I questioned two journalists with intimate knowledge of the story, both said Mapes never shared her information with them.

For the record: George W. Bush has always maintained that he joined the National Guard not to avoid service in Vietnam but because he wanted to be a fighter pilot. He has openly acknowledged that he did not want to be drafted and serve in the infantry, and says he signed up for the Guard knowing full well he would have to spend almost two years in flight training and another four years in part-time service.

It is also true, however, that in his 1968 application to join the Texas Air National Guard Bush was asked if he wanted to go overseas and he checked the box that said “do not volunteer.” But as the Washington Post reported on July 28, 1999: “Bush said in an interview that he did not recall checking the box. Two weeks later, his office provided a statement from a former, state-level Air Guard personnel officer, asserting that since Bush ‘was applying for a specific position with the 147th Fighter Group, it would have been inappropriate for him to have volunteered for an overseas assignment and he probably was so advised by the military personnel clerk assisting him in completing the form.’” He later told the Post: “Had my unit been called up, I’d have gone . . . to Vietnam. I was prepared to go.”

However the complexities and seeming contradictions are interpreted, if Bush *at any point* had volunteered to fly combat missions in Vietnam – as the CBS investigation unequivocally states – how then could he have been a slacker?

The clear answer is that he could not – unless, of course, he volunteered to go to Vietnam knowing full well he wouldn't be taken. But if that was the case Mapes would have had an obligation to report both that he volunteered and then produce a credible witness to say it was a sham. She did neither.

Mapes, a well-known liberal at CBS News, has always contended that she had no agenda, that she was not out to get President Bush. But if she knew that George Bush had volunteered for service in Vietnam – as the CBS outside panel clearly concludes – she obviously had an obligation to share that with her viewers.

Now the question is, did she share what she knew with her correspondent, Dan Rather. Or to put it another way: What did Rather know – and when did he know it? The answers may come out at trial, if his case against CBS goes that far. At the moment, neither side appears anxious to settle.