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## LBJ's Lies About His War Record

Fact &amp; Fiction

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### by HNN Staff

Much to no one's surprise perhaps, the more evidence that surfaces about Lyndon Johnson's war record, the less there seems to it, according to two new reports filed on CNN.

Johnson you'll recall was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in the summer of 1942 by Douglas MacArthur. LBJ, then a member of Congress, had persuaded FDR to send him on an inspection tour of our forces in the Pacific. The trip had always seemed like a political stunt by a politician who wanted to burnish his credentials in anticipation of future campaigns for higher office. Johnson, who had been the first congressman after Pearl Harbor to sign up for active military duty, had agreed to fly as an observer on a single bombing mission over Lae, New Guinea. But before the plane could reach the target a generator went out, forcing the pilot to turn back home to base.

This much is agreed on. Where accounts differ is on what happened next. Johnson always claimed the plane came under enemy fire. His Silver Star citation says, "As our planes neared the target area, they were intercepted by eight hostile fighters." A book published in 1964, *The Mission*, quotes two members of the crew who substantiated Johnson's story, adding that the future president was "cool as ice" under fire.

But critics always suspected LBJ had inflated the danger he faced. Now there's reason to believe they were right. The lone member of the crew still living, Bob Marshall, the gunner, insists the plane never came under fire that day. "No way," Marshall told CNN. "No, that story was made up, put in there in my mind by the author of the book. 'Cause we never seen Zero, was never attacked. Nothing."

After CNN aired the interview with Marshall, the son of another member of the crew came forward. Billy B. Boothe, Jr., said his father, the plane's navigator, confirmed in a newspaper story in 1986 that the plane LBJ was on had not faced Japanese Zeros. The navigator told the paper he had tried to set the record straight at the time *The Mission* appeared. "I called Air Force intelligence, said that I didn't necessarily go along with the book that was being written and what should I do? And they said don't make any comments unless I could go along with what was being said."

The Johnson Library stands by Johnson's account, noting that a contemporaneous diary entry written in Johnson's hand indicates that the plane had indeed been fired upon. But the entry is ambiguous. Johnson may have been referring to the planes that continued on to Lae. They indeed came under fire.

The only surprise here is that Robert Caro, whose biography of Lyndon "Bull Shit" Johnson is famously withering, gives LBJ the benefit of the doubt. Though Caro is of the opinion that Johnson did not deserve the star—"Because if you accept everything that he said, he was still in action for no more than 13 minutes and

only as an observer. Men who flew many missions, brave men, never got a Silver Star"—the biographer believes "the weight of the evidence at this moment is that the plane was attacked by Zeroes and that he was cool under fire." Caro, however, concedes that Johnson lied about the mission. "I would say that it's an issue of exaggerations," Caro told CNN. "He said that he flew on many missions, not one mission. He said that the crew members, the other members of the Air Force group, were so admiring of him that they called him Raider Johnson. Neither of these things are true."

Pick your favorite LBJ. The LBJ who lied a little about his ride on a B-26 bomber or the LBJ who lied a lot.