Pentagon to check Kerry war record
By Julian Coman in Newark, Ohio

In a fresh blow to John Kerry's flagging presidential campaign, the Pentagon has ordered an official investigation into the awards of the Democratic senator's five Vietnam War decorations.

News of the inquiry came as President George W Bush opened an 11-point lead over his rival - the widest margin since serious campaigning began - according to the first poll released since last week's Republican convention.

The highly unusual inquiry is to be carried out by the inspector-general's office of the United States navy, for which Sen Kerry served as a Swift Boat captain for four months in 1968, making two tours of duty.

He was wounded in action and subsequently awarded three Purple Hearts, a Silver Star and a Bronze Star. But for the past month, the exact details of Mr Kerry's military service in Vietnam have become shrouded in a controversy that the navy has now decided warrants a full-blown search for the truth.

According to a self-styled group of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, many of whom served in Vietnam during the same period, Mr Kerry exaggerated the significance of combat incidents and inaccurately reported the circumstances of his injuries, at least one of which was allegedly self-inflicted. The accusations are repeated in a book, Unfit to Command, which was published last month.

Last week, the Kerry campaign attempted to leave the Vietnam debate behind, as signs appeared that the controversy was damaging Mr Kerry's standing in the polls. But to the consternation of campaign strategists, the US navy has now agreed to a request by Judicial Watch, a bi-partisan lobby group, for a full inquiry. Judicial Watch is calling for the Navy to report before the elections, but Navy officials are so far refusing to give any timetable for the inquiry.

In an August letter to the Pentagon, the group's president, Tom Fitton, requested an investigation into the "determination and final disposition of the awards granted to Lieutenant (junior grade) John Forbes..."
Kerry, US Naval Reserve*, in response to the Swift Boat Veterans’ allegations.

A navy spokesman confirmed on Friday that the inspector-general’s office at the Pentagon had authorised the inquiry. “It is the responsibility of all personnel to correct errors in official records,” said the spokesman. Another official said privately: “There’s a feeling that it’s time to deal with this thoroughly, once and for all.”

Among other records to be examined is a citation of Mr Kerry for bravery that was apparently signed by the former Navy Secretary, John Lehman, and contributed to the award of his silver star. The glowing citation states: “By his brave actions, bold initiative and unwavering devotion to duty, Lt Kerry reflected great credit on himself.” But Mr Lehman denies all knowledge of the commendation. “It’s a total mystery to me,” he said last week. “I never saw it, I never signed it and I never approved it.” The inquiry will also investigate other reports and citations leading to the award of Mr Kerry’s medals.

On Friday, Mr Lehman endorsed the investigation of Mr Kerry’s awards, saying that the relevant navy records needed to be “thoroughly researched and the facts established”. Mr Fitton said: “We hope this is the beginning of an actual investigation of the legitimacy of Sen Kerry’s awards by the navy and the Pentagon.”

In an angry statement from the Kerry campaign headquarters, Michael Meehan, Mr Kerry’s senior adviser, condemned the navy probe as an expensive waste of the Pentagon’s resources.

“The facts are clear,” said Mr Meehan. “The navy awarded John Kerry the Silver Star, a Bronze Star with Combat V and three Purple Hearts. This is a waste of taxpayers’ dollars and the Pentagon’s time, especially during wartime.”

The inquiry comes at the end of the worst week of Mr Kerry’s campaign. The poll showing an 11-point lead by President Bush, to be published in this week’s Time magazine, was taken during the first three days of the Republican Convention in New York, which featured repeated direct attacks on Mr Kerry as an unreliable candidate for the role of Commander-in-Chief during the war on terror.

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