

An Epidemic of Military Imposters

By Steve Robinson

"The name and regiment of the person with the action so certified are to be entered in the 'Book of Merit,' which will be kept at the orderly office. Should any who are not entitled to these honors have the insolence to assume the badges of them, they shall be severely punished."

So wrote General George Washington in his Aug. 7, 1782, general order establishing the nation's first military decoration, now known as the Purple Heart. Recent amendments to the laws of our land, proposed legislation for a national database of valor awards, and a concerted effort by federal law enforcement personnel to bring lawbreakers to justice, are aimed at ensuring that General Washington's instructions are fully honored and implemented.

As this article is written there is a veritable epidemic of military imposters loose in our nation; respect and admiration for our armed forces personnel are at a level not seen since the days of World War Two. Military personnel are seen as laudable and commendable, and are praised and honored at public gatherings. Hardly a day passes without mention of "our heroes in uniform" in the print and broadcast media. While most military veterans are loath to be called a "hero" themselves, most will readily suggest that they have met or served with some bona fide heroes. There are some members of our society, however, who covet the title of "military hero" and intentionally seek the spotlight, despite never having served in the nation's armed forces. There are some legitimate military veterans who are not satisfied with their record of achievements and duties and who embellish their military records, claiming duties, skills, awards and commendations which they never actually earned.

False claims of military service are offered by charlatans for a plethora of reasons. Lecherous Lotharios attempt to impress potential female companions with their false claims of military prowess. Chest-thumping barroom braggarts attempt to impress and intimidate their drinking buddies with false claims of 'secret missions'. Jail cell braggarts attempt to intimidate inmates and guards with false claims of deadly military hand-to-hand training. Office personnel offer false claims in an attempt to gain an advantage in the battle for promotions where preferences are given to military veterans. Corporate executives use false military credentials in an attempt to gain an edge in corporate marketing directed at military clients. Members of military and fraternal organizations attempt to gain undeserved praise and unearned recognition with false claims of extraordinary valor and wear medals which reflect their false claims. One of the largest contingents of military imposters involves those who falsely claim to be military veterans for the purpose of obtaining VA medical benefits, tax benefits, and monetary compensation.

The majority of Americans are trusting individuals who readily accept personal credentials when they are offered. Most wouldn't think of claiming deeds or honors which they didn't earn. Military imposters thrive in this trusting atmosphere.

Hollywood movies are intentionally designed so that viewers might imagine themselves in situations being portrayed on the big screen. Many movies in recent years have depicted an 'everyman' going about his normal job by day, but acting as a secret agent at nights and on weekends in the defense of our nation. Co-workers are shown to be completely oblivious to the skills and abilities of these remarkable warriors. These surreptitious heroes are often depicted receiving secret awards and medals which 'cannot be documented because of national security interests'. Often there are depictions of military actions taking place which are never documented, and men being held as prisoners of war without records of their captivity, all presented as being in an effort to preserve national security. Such fictional plot elements are completely false and unrealistic, but since only about 7% of the American population has been involved in active military service, the remainder of the population is ill-equipped to determine where reality ends and fantasy begins. When an imposter offers claims of military service, rank, awards, and events which are virtually lifted from the scripts of such movies, few outside of military veterans will suspect the duplicity.

The Stolen Valor Act of 2005

When informed about the growing epidemic of military imposters in our nation, many people ask "why bother with them?" Inquirers often suggest that military imposters are more to be pitied for their lack of self-esteem and self-worth than prosecuted, and that the making of false claims of military service is a 'victimless crime'. On the contrary, it is not victimless, and it should be strongly stressed that it is a crime; a violation of federal law. Title 18 of the United States Code, Sections 702 and 704, the original laws which pertained to this sort of thing, had some sizeable loopholes which allowed imposters to get away with making false claims so long as they didn't actually wear the specific awards, medals, or insignias. Those loopholes were closed by the STOLEN VALOR ACT OF 2005 which amended the original Title 18 USC sections. It was signed into law by President G.W. Bush on 20 December 2006 and the making of false verbal claims is now legally defined as a violation of federal law.

The applicable laws refer to "the uniform, or a distinctive part thereof or anything similar to a distinctive part of the uniform of any of the armed services of the United States..." as well as "any decoration or medal authorized by Congress for the armed forces of the United States, or any of the service medals or badges awarded to the members of such forces, or the ribbon, button, or rosette of any such badge, decoration, or medal, or any colorable imitation thereof, except when authorized under regulations made pursuant to law..."

The amended law specifically includes doubly harsh penalties for those who make false claims of being awarded the highest medals for valor such as the Congressional Medal of

Honor, the three Service Crosses, the Silver Star, and the Purple Heart, or of being awarded the POW Medal.

Federal law enforcement agents are currently engaged in Operation Stolen Valor, a nationwide effort to bring the most egregious offenders to justice and demonstrate to the American public that our government will not tolerate those in our society who make false military claims for any reason, whether it is to gain employment or promotion under false pretenses, obtain unearned government benefits, or for purposes of self-aggrandizement of an over-inflated ego.

There are victims aplenty when false military claims are made. In addition to those individuals who are personally defrauded of goods, services and cash by multitudes of military imposters, the American taxpayers often bear the burden and costs of fraudulently obtained benefits which annually runs into the billions of dollars. That's "Billions" with a capital "B".

James O'Neill is assistant Inspector General for the VA, and it is O'Neill's office which is responsible for rooting out those who defraud the VA.

"We take it seriously because this money is meant for veterans, not for fakers. Every dollar that's lost to a faker is one more dollar that can't be spent on a veteran," stated O'Neill in a recent interview with Military Times.

Fraudulent Claims for Profit

On Friday 21 September of this year Christopher Lee Proe was arrested in South Yarmouth Massachusetts for writing five fraudulent checks totaling more than \$4,000 at a nightclub. Proe had spent an evening in the nightclub telling everyone that he was a soldier just back from Iraq, that he had nearly died there, and that he was celebrating being home. Based upon his claims of being a member of the military recently returned from a war zone, the club management waived their normal policy as a courtesy and allowed him to write personal checks instead of requiring cash or a credit card.

Proe has admitted to police that he was never in Iraq and never served in the military in any capacity. He has a criminal history in the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Virginia. Proe is specifically wanted in Indiana for failure to register as a sex offender. Police in South Yarmouth have charged him with five counts of Larceny over \$250 and he was scheduled for arraignment in Barnstable District Court on Monday 24 September.

In this instance it was the private business – the nightclub – which was defrauded after having made a good-faith effort to extend a courtesy to a man they thought to be a legitimate American military veteran.

A recent article in the Air Force Times described the case of Mr. Larry Porter of Seattle who spun a tale of harsh abuse and near death by drowning as a sailor undergoing water survival training while in basic training. He added vivid accounts of having witnessed the

death of a civilian worker who fell from a ship in a California shipyard. Presumably on the basis of resulting mental trauma, Porter, who spent a total of 15 months in the US Navy in the 1970s, was granted \$134,000 in VA benefits and \$40,000 from the Social Security Administration.

All of Porter's claims were subsequently found to be false, and he is currently serving a three-year jail sentence and must repay all of the money which he took from the VA and the Social Security Administration.

In this instance it was the American tax payers, the Veterans Administration, and the Social Security Administration who were defrauded. All too often such fraud is not discovered and both the VA and the SSA are bilked out of billions of dollars each year by those who are not legitimately eligible to receive benefits from either administration.

And then there is the case of Jesse MacBeth, a former soldier who served in the US Army only 44 days and who didn't even finish basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. According to Ronald Friedman, assistant U.S. attorney for the Western District of Washington state, MacBeth filed falsified discharge documents with the VA stating that he served three years and separated from the military as a corporal after deploying to both Afghanistan and Iraq. He also claimed to have earned a Ranger tab and a Purple Heart.

MacBeth's claim for VA benefits was denied, but that didn't stop his charade. According to Friedman, MacBeth produced anti-war videos claiming he committed atrocities while serving as a Ranger in Iraq, that he had killed innocent civilians after being ordered to do so.

The truth is that MacBeth was never a corporal, never received a Purple Heart for wounds received in combat, and neither saw nor participated in war crimes in Iraq or Afghanistan. He was never a Ranger, and was released from the Army for issues related to performance and conduct. There is no possible way, therefore, that he could be suffering from the combat-based post-traumatic stress disorder for which he sought compensation and for which he compiled his falsified military record.

On Friday 21 September MacBeth was sentenced to five months in jail, three months in a halfway house, and three years' probation for falsifying a Department of Veterans Affairs claim and an Army discharge record. U.S. District Court Judge Robert Lasnik also ordered MacBeth to seek help for mental health problems, especially as they related to committing domestic violence.

The videos he made were translated into Arabic for Middle Eastern audiences and MacBeth became a 'poster boy' for the anti-war movement. He fooled peace groups, those with a political axe to grind in contention with the current administration and its foreign policies, and with alternative news media, becoming something of an anti-war star over the past several years.

The videos proclaimed his concocted stories of war atrocities, including MacBeth's claims that "We would burn their bodies ... hang their bodies from the rafters in the mosque". These videos have been widely distributed in areas of the world where they will do the greatest possible harm to American efforts. It is likely that any details which are disseminated in the Middle East regarding MacBeth's conviction and jail sentence for falsifying this information will only be interpreted by America's enemies as evidence of a conspiracy to 'cover up' the fictional atrocities which he fabricated for his own fraudulent ends.

In this instance the VA saw through the false claims and denied MacBeth's application for benefits to which he had no legal right. It is the American public, and the American reputation abroad, however, which has suffered terribly as a result of his fraud and self-aggrandizement. Doubtless his widely-distributed claims of war atrocities will incite renewed violence against our own military forces and greatly embolden those who seek to counter US efforts at home and abroad.

According to federal prosecutors, in Philadelphia a prominent leader among Delaware County veterans has been found to have claimed and worn military medals he never earned including the Silver Star, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.

Formal charges have been filed against James Anthony Alleva, 54, the Commandant of the Marine Corps League's General Smedley D. Butler Detachment 741. Mr. Alleva was ordered to surrender his passport and subsequently released on \$10,000 bail pending disposition of the case which was filed by U.S. Attorney Patrick L. Meehan and FBI Special Agent-in-Charge J.P. Weis.

According to the charges, Alleva allegedly "altered his military discharge certificate, wore unauthorized military medals or decorations, and falsely represented himself as an award recipient of commendations achieved in action".

In a news article recently published online by the Delco Times (Delaware County, PA) detailing the matter, Assistant U.S. Attorney Jose R. Arteaga stated that Alleva was cited Aug. 7 for allegedly altering his military discharge certificate and on Feb. 5 and Aug. 7 for illegally wearing the Silver Star medal, the Bronze Star medal, two Purple Heart medals, awards only authorized by Congress, and Parachute Jump Wings and a SCUBA Badge for completing diver school.

If convicted of all charges, Mr. Alleva faces a maximum sentence of two years imprisonment, one year supervised release and a \$110,000 fine.

In this instance it was the American public in general, and members of the Marine Corps League in particular, who were defrauded. In fact it appears that the initial queries regarding Mr. Alleva's claimed commendations and awards were prompted by suspicious members of the Marine Corps League.

Those who are serving or have served in the military forces highly value selflessness by their fellows. That selflessness – the placing of a higher value on the safety and lives of one’s fellows above one’s own safety and life – is respected, acknowledged and honored by the award of medals and commendations. Falsely claiming to have been granted such awards, military imposters seek to mislead others into believing that they belong in the company of those who have selflessly put themselves at risk for their brothers-in-arms. The dishonor which such deception does to those who truly earned the awards discredits the contributions of the real heroes and devalues the sacrifices of those who gave their lives in service to the nation while observing those ideals.

Devaluation of History

World War Two veterans are reportedly dying at the rate of approximately 1,000 persons a day, and many of them have never shared the details of their military experiences outside the limits of their own families. Korean War veterans are aging rapidly and their history is likewise being lost at an alarming rate. The decade-long televised accounts of the Vietnam War made it possibly the most widely documented conflict of the 20th Century and yet many of the men and women involved in that unpopular conflict returned home and resumed their lives without telling others the details of their service.

While military actions in Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), Operation Desert Storm/Shield (1990-91), the ongoing Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) and ongoing Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq) have all received massive televised coverage, the individual experiences of military veterans in these conflicts go largely unreported and undocumented.

Seven years ago, in an effort to preserve the oral histories of individual military participants, the Library of Congress began its Veterans History Project. They invited military veterans or their families to compile written, oral, or video histories of the military events of their lives. Sadly, those who feel comfortable with exaggerating their personal contributions related to military service have had a veritable heyday at the expense of accuracy in the Veterans History Project.

Recently a reporter for the Marine Corps Times looked into the actual credentials of a number of individuals who had contributed to the Veterans History Project. The findings were truly alarming. More than half of those listed as having received the Congressional Medal of Honor had not actually been granted that award. That reporter also found 30 false claims of receiving the Army’s Distinguished Service Cross, and 14 false claims related to the Navy Cross. And this was only a cursory examination. Further examinations are ongoing related to claims of membership and service in various elite units such as the Army SF, Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, and Marine Force Recon. Initial examinations reveal significant numbers of false statements.

Initial responses from the Library of Congress indicated that there had been some errors found but blamed them on clerical transcription errors. In the work-a-day business world clerical errors of this magnitude would certainly justify some serious changes in clerical

staff. However, given the fact that veterans making contributions to the Veterans History Project must complete a written statement as well as a verbal interview, it seems clear that despite the initial response from the LOC, “simple clerical errors” cannot begin to explain away all of the ‘erroneous’ claims.

The Library of Congress subsequently issued a statement defending the Veterans History Project as a congressionally mandated effort that isn't a historical archive and thus doesn't have to verify the accuracy of the accounts submitted to it. Library of Congress officials, however, confirmed that they would remove false medal claims when they were discovered.

“When you put the Library of Congress stamp on the project, people will take it as factual history. If they are not going to care about the facts, then they should rename the project ‘War Stories, Including Some That Are True,’” said Mr. Doug Sterner, who with his wife, Pam, originated and championed the Stolen Valor Act of 2005 in order to strengthen federal laws regarding military imposters.

Mr. Sterner, who operates the Home of Heroes web site which includes information about Congressional Medal of Honor recipients, has proposed that Congress order a national database be compiled on all those service members who have been awarded the nation's top medals for valor, including the Congressional Medal of Honor and the three service crosses, among others. Mr. Sterner firmly believes it is the government's job to maintain a definitive database for all valor awards and he is seeking congressional support for the “MILITARY VALOR ROLL OF HONOR ACT” which would create such a database.

Mr. Sterner, who is himself an Army veteran of the Vietnam War and a holder of the Bronze Star, believes public access to this important information would be a tremendous service to veterans and their families, and would serve to make quick work of the imposters who pretend to be heroes. The database, which Mr. Sterner guesses would cost about \$8 million to create, would quickly pay for itself by ending much of the fraud rampant in claims made to the Veterans Administration. Mr. Sterner pointed to recent arrests in the Seattle area where a number of military imposters were caught. Several of those military imposters had received a total of \$1.4 million in unearned VA benefits. When such a figure is expanded to take in the entire nation the magnitude of the fraud perpetrated by military imposters against the VA alone is truly staggering.

On September 28, 2007, Congressman John T. Salazar (D-Colorado) announced he will be introducing legislation during the first week of October as a follow-up to The Stolen Valor Act which was signed into law by President Bush in December 2006. The Military Valor Roll of Honor Act of 2007 will create a database containing the names and citations of individuals who have been awarded the Medal of Honor or any other medal authorized by the United States Congress. Congressman Patrick J. Murphy (D-Pennsylvania) is joining Congressman Salazar in these efforts.

“Medals recognize the best American qualities – courage, honor, and sacrifice,” said Salazar. “These honors are reserved for those who willingly risked their lives for our country. The Medal of Honor is our nation’s highest military honor. It is our job to protect the honor and integrity of our veterans, to make sure the memory of their heroism is not tarnished.

“Having a readily accessible and public database will not only give the tools to law enforcement to prosecute fraudulent claims, but will properly recognize those who have been honored with these citations,” Rep. Salazar added. “I’m proud to work with Congressman Patrick Murphy, who is a fellow veteran, to bring this historic legislation forward.”

Readers wishing to express their support for the **MILITARY VALOR ROLL OF HONOR ACT of 2007** may contact Congressman John T. Salazar or Congressman Patrick J. Murphy at their Washington offices listed below, or by communicating their support directly to their own Congressional Representatives.

(Rep. John T. Salazar (CO-03) is a veteran of the U.S. Army and a member of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, and was the sponsor of the STOLEN VALOR ACT of 2005. Rep. Patrick J. Murphy (PA-08) is the only Iraq War Veteran in Congress and a recipient of the Bronze Star; he serves on the House Armed Services Committee.)

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Author Steve Robinson served on active duty as an enlisted man in the US Navy from January 1970 to November 1978. After schooling as a Radioman, he subsequently attended and successfully graduated from Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training and joined SEAL Team ONE in early 1971. Following his active duty, Robinson worked as a Defense Analyst specializing in Soviet Threat for a number of military defense contract firms. In 1993 he turned his hobby of historical blacksmithing into a full time job. He is now medically retired and lives with his wife in southwest Missouri.

Robinson currently volunteers his services as a member of the Advisory Board for the POW Network (www.pownetwork.org), and as an SOF Analyst and Contributing Journalist for the Naval Special Warfare Archives (www.navyfrogmen.com). He is the author of the book “NO GUTS, NO GLORY – Unmasking Navy SEAL Imposters” (2002).