

STOLEN VALOR

Few things provoke the ire of the military community more than false claims of honor and service.

By Jennifer Peters
Illustration by Chris Hiers

Far that these decorations would be misappropriated. Washington first raised the issue in 1782, saying, "Should any who are not entitled to the honors, have the insolence to assume the badges of them, they shall be severely punished." In the more than 200 years since, however, punishment for false heroes has been minimal. The first attempt at preventing such claims didn't come until 2005, when the Stolen Valor Act was drafted and brought before Congress, then signed into law by George W. Bush in 2006. But this past June, the law was struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, which claimed that liars' rights to free speech would be unfairly restricted by a statute that was too broad, and that lying about being a veteran was protected by the First Amendment.

Almost immediately following the Supreme Court's 6-3 ruling, a new version of the Stolen Valor Act was drafted and, in September, approved by the House of Representatives in a 410-3 vote. The new law—sponsored by Congressman Joe Heck (R-Nev.)—improves upon the original with new language that its proponents hope will help it pass muster with the Supreme Court. The new bill is more specific, stating in clear terms that lying about military service in order to benefit from such dishonesty will be a punishable offense.



Vietnam vet
Doug Sterner

"There are a number of professions that have legal protections from impersonators," says Joe Davis, director of public affairs for Veterans of Foreign Wars, "including lawyers and doctors, but none have the possibility of dying for one's country as part of their job description. Those same protections must be extended to military heroes. Medals, awards, and badges have meaning in the military. Protecting them from wannabe heroes who want to capitalize on the military's honor and public trust is the least we can do."

Vietnam veteran Doug Sterner and his wife, Pam, couldn't agree more. The couple was the driving force behind the original bill in 2005, with Pam writing the policy analysis that led to Congressman John T. Salazar's (D-Co.) proposed legislation and, eventually, the passage of the bill. Doug Sterner is also responsible for the only public database cataloging recipients of the military's top honors,

with more than 112,000 entries; he has the records needed to verify another 38,000, and expects them to be online by the beginning of 2013. (Approximately 350,000 medals above the Bronze Star and up to the Medal of Honor have been awarded.)

Sterner began maintaining his database out of a passion for preserving history and showcasing the heroics of decorated servicemen and -women, and he says that remains his primary motivation for running the Hall of Valor website, which is now supported by *Military Times* (MilitaryTimes.com/citations-medals-awards). Sterner says he began coming across instances of stolen valor. "I would get emails from people saying, 'You don't list my uncle. He got the Medal of Honor,' and it was a phony," he explains. "That's when I first began to realize that there were people brazen enough to lie about being Medal of Honor recipients."

In July, following the Supreme Court's decision, the Department of Defense launched its own official medals database. Unfortunately, that database lists only medals given out for service on or after September 11, 2001. This means that of the hundreds

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VFW Director of Public Affairs Joe Davis today (right), and in Vietnam

of Medals of Honor awarded in the military's history, less than a dozen are included on the DOD's website.

According to Sterner, most instances of stolen valor involve the Purple Heart—thousands have been awarded in the recent wars alone—and the Distinguished Service Cross, records of which are maintained almost exclusively by Sterner in the Hall of Valor.

Even without such resources, veterans and activists say that most impostors are easy to spot, as their outsized bravado and willingness to tell war stories make them stand out from legitimate heroes. "True heroes are quiet," says the VFW's Davis. "Telling their stories means reliving some of the worst moments of their lives. [Most would] gladly trade in all their medals just to have been able to save one more of their buddies."

"Guys who've actually been in the shit and done some bad stuff, they don't talk," says retired Sergeant Klay South, a double Purple Heart recipient and founder of Veterans of Valor, which aids wounded combat veterans. "They'll say, 'Yeah, I've been there, I've done that,' but they don't go into detail. They don't want to

rely it. The ones who go into great detail? They didn't do shit."

The internet and the rise of social media have made it easier for impostors to flourish. South has seen numerous fake profiles popping up on Facebook and Twitter. While some profiles use photos and information stolen from actual soldiers, others post photos of themselves in mismatched uniforms and displaying medals from the wrong service branch, making them easy to spot if you're in the know.

Sterner believes that the primary motivation for most of these fakers is social, and most likely involves impressing women. He thinks this is part of the problem with writing new legislation specifying that only those who benefit from their lies can be prosecuted. "What is a benefit?" Sterner asks. "If claiming to be a Navy SEAL with a Silver Star gets a guy laid, is that a benefit?" Sterner says yes. Besides, he points out, "If there were no benefit, there would be no incentive for people to [lie about military service]."

Each case of stolen valor, each impostor—whether online or out in the world—causes strong emotional reactions from those who have served. "When someone wears a fake uniform, the first thing that comes to mind is all the friends you lost in combat and what a dishonor [the fake] is," South says. "It's a dishonor to our fallen and the ones who haven't returned home. It just makes me sick."

But it isn't only veterans who are harmed. According to Sterner, the real victims are members of the American public. "Those who will commit acts of stolen valor are predators, and they prey on society," he says. "The stolen-valor legislation is critical to protecting vulnerable American citizens from crafty predators who lie about their service, sacrifice, and heroism to take advantage of others—and it happens on a daily basis."

South agrees, saying, "People are sympathetic to the military and they don't want to second-guess a veteran. You don't want to call him a liar. It's an act of good faith."

And that's a big part of why Sterner firmly believes in the importance of the Stolen Valor Act, and in punishing those who exploit the public's support of veterans. "I would rather see a dozen phonies get honor for something they didn't do," he says, "than unjustly accuse a real hero of being a fraud." 

