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## **Claims of medals amount to stolen valor**

### **Tribune investigation reveals hundreds of unsupported claims regarding veterans with war medals**

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WASHINGTON

Scores of Americans, from clergymen to lawyers to CEOs, are claiming medals of valor they never earned. advertisement

A Tribune investigation has found that the fabrication of heroic war records is far more extensive than you might think.

Take the online edition of Who's Who, long the nation's premier biographical reference. Of the 333 people whose profiles state they earned one of the nation's most esteemed military medals, fully a third of those claims cannot be supported by military records.

Even in death, these stories live on. A look at 273 obituaries published in the past decade alone found that in more than four of five cases, official records didn't support decorations for bravery attributed to the deceased.

The Tribune also found bogus decorations, including at least two Medals of Honor, engraved on headstones in military cemeteries across the country.

In all, more than half the medals for bravery examined, including the exalted Medal of Honor, are unsupported by official military records obtained by the Tribune from federal archives under the Freedom of Information Act.

The men whose obituaries or profiles in Who's Who make these claims are mainly individuals of note and accomplishment: lawyers, physicians, clergymen, CEOs, business executives, company presidents, university professors, career military officers, teachers, policemen, elected officials, even a psychiatrist.

"The problem is rampant," said Mike Sanborn, a former Marine who is the FBI agent in charge of investigating violations of the Stolen Valor Act. The law, signed in late 2006, makes it a federal crime to falsely claim, orally or in writing, that one has earned a medal for valor. Penalties range from 6 months to a year in prison and up to a \$100,000 fine.

The fraud is more than a slur on real heroes or a source of false bragging rights. Money also is at stake. The Department of Veterans Affairs, for instance, provides financial and medical benefits on the basis of decorations that support claims for post-traumatic stress disorder and other war-related illnesses.

There have been an estimated 40 prosecutions under the Stolen Valor Act, nearly all ending with pleas of guilty and some in prison sentences. But enforcement of the act is hampered by the absence of a national database where employers, biographers, obituary writers, VA officials and others who need to know can verify such claims.

Although a bill is pending in Congress that would create such a database, at the moment the only official compilation is for recipients of the Medal of Honor, maintained online by the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

The Medal of Honor is the nation's most esteemed decoration for bravery under fire, and Who's Who features six living recipients who can be found online, including Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) and former Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.). But Who's Who also lists 15 others who did not receive the honor and, in some cases, never even served in the military.

Short of looking at original military records, as the Tribune did, there is no easy way to verify claims for the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross or the Air Force Cross, the so-called "service crosses" that rank in order just below the Medal of Honor.

After examining Who's Who and obituaries, the Tribune used military records to unearth 84 bogus Medals of Honor, 119 Distinguished Service Crosses, 99 Navy Crosses, five Air Force Crosses and 96 Silver Stars.

Such numbers infuriate Sanborn, the government's chief stolen-valor hunter. As he noted: "There are men and women coming home in boxes who deserve these medals."

'I deserved it'

Why would so many invent acts of military heroism? There's no evidence that such fabrication is any more common than, say, lying about academic or athletic feats. But of all the achievements society celebrates, proof of courage under fire surrounds a person with a special aura, a mystique that sets him or her apart from fellow lawyers or doctors or executives.

The Tribune was able to contact 54 of the 103 individuals whose profiles in Who's Who claimed medals for valor that were not supported by their military records.

Fifteen people reached by the newspaper ultimately acknowledged that they had intentionally credited themselves with a high-ranking medal they did not possess.

Their explanations ranged from crass to poignant. One man said he lied because he was emotionally upset over his son's fatal battle with AIDS. A few said they wanted to impress their children or others close to them.

Michael Roshkind, a former senior executive at Motown Records, said he had awarded himself the Navy Cross "to make myself a hero to my wife, or something like that. I'm not proud of that, but it's history."

Asked whether he intended to contact Who's Who and correct his biography, Roshkind replied: "Why would I do that? I have no interest in that."

A man from Issaquah, Wash., who acknowledged falsely claiming the Navy Cross said he couldn't explain why. Then he offered this insight:

"I did it for my own self-gratification," said James William Massick, who owns a heavy-equipment

manufacturing company.

Another common explanation echoed the complaint of soldiers through the ages--that a deserved award for valor had been denied. Robert Martin Kilmark, a Florida physician, included a Silver Star in his profile out of pique at not having received that decoration, he said, for piloting his burning B-17 bomber into the Adriatic Sea to save the lives of his crew.

"I was pretty angry about it," he said. "I had been recommended for it, and I deserved it. And to tell you the truth, I'm still angry about it."

A Tet 'hero'--at age 14

One of the most common responses among those contacted by the Tribune was that they had no idea their Who's Who profiles claimed medals for valor they did not hold. Others responded by hanging up the phone or maintaining that they in fact had earned the medals.

But none provided to the Tribune proof in the form of a military document or an actual medal.

In addition, Who's Who officials were able to show the Tribune annual updates in which many of these men signed and returned profiles verifying their bogus claims to the medals in question.

"I do not believe any of these people are going to admit what they did," said Who's Who publisher James Pfister. "But I know Who's Who never puts data in the awards section unless it comes from the listee."

Since the Tribune began contacting veterans about the existence of their medals, 11 have contacted Who's Who to ask that the medals be removed from their biographies.

For its listings, Who's Who says it relies on information furnished exclusively by its "biographees," included by invitation on the basis of past achievement or future promise.

Biographees complete extensive personal histories and are given the chance to check their profiles before they appear in print. Once a year they receive an update form in which they can correct errors or add new accomplishments.

Some of the biographies described exploits that could not have occurred, such as a man who claimed the Distinguished Service Cross in Vietnam for having rescued men from a burning truck near Khe Sanh, when his military records showed he was a clerk-typist stationed in Hawaii. Another man claimed to have earned a Silver Star during the 1968 Tet Offensive--a time, according to the birth date in his Who's Who profile, when he was 14 years old.

Other Who's Who biographies are unbelievable on their face, including one claiming two Navy Crosses, a Distinguished Flying Cross and 66 Silver Stars. (The record for a single soldier is 10 Silver Stars.)

John Agenbroad, the four-time mayor of Springboro, Ohio, whose profile in Who's Who credited him with one Silver Star, spoke in several interviews with the Tribune about the medal. Asked if he owned that decoration, he initially replied, "Yes, I do."

But his military records list no Silver Star. And Agenbroad, who has campaigned on his war record, later acknowledged he didn't have one. He said he was unaware he was in Who's Who and didn't recall sending information to the publisher.

How did he explain the Who's Who entry? "I have absolutely no answer for that," he said. "I don't know why I would do that, but obviously I did."

Agendbroad has since sent a letter to Who's Who asking that his biography be modified to delete the medal, according to Who's Who.

Spotting such misrepresentations could be made much easier.

A bill pending in Congress, the Military Valor Roll of Honor Act, would require the Defense Department to create a national online database naming all who have earned medals for valor.

But the Pentagon is arguing against the database, citing the cost as one of its main reasons.

Doug Sterner, a decorated Army sergeant who served in Vietnam and drafted much of the language in the roll of honor act, laughs when he hears this.

Over the past decade, Sterner has built from musty original records an online database of valor-medal recipients going back to the Civil War. Sterner estimates that his database at [homeofheroes.com](http://homeofheroes.com), which now holds 118,247 medals, is 75 percent complete.

The out-of-pocket expense to compile it: \$25,000.

Prompted by the Tribune's findings, Pfister of Who's Who already is changing his company's policies. The publisher has long fact-checked educational credentials and work histories, on the lookout for fabrications. Now military decorations will be scrutinized as well.

"We never thought anybody would be dumb enough to make those up," he said.

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